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No. 64

Double Sight, the Death Shot;

OR,

The Outlaw of the Chaparral.

A Tale of Sport and Peril in Texas.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.
AUTHOR OF "THREE-FINGERED JACK," "GOSPEL
GEORGE," "THE LONG HAIR'D 'PARDS,"
"OLD BULL'S EYE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. PERILOUS SPORTS.

"FIFTY dollars' wuth, ef a cent! Silk ones, tew! and free tew them as grabs 'em—waal, I swan tew man!"

"Better try your luck, stranger," observed a tall, fine-looking young man, an amused smile upon his face.

The scene was a peculiar one. Thousands of human beings, young and old, rich and poor, the blue blood of the land shoulder to shoulder

with the ragged, homeless outcast, rising in tier after tier, one above the other, until five-sixths of the vast amphitheater was surrounded by a mass of rustling, buzzing humanity. The remaining sixth of the circle was completed by several stout pens and one massive wooden den, its front containing a square door of heavy iron bars. In the center of the arena stood a tall live-oak tree, the trunk of which had been peeled and plentifully daubed with grease from its base up to where the thick-growing branches had been left untrimmed, some twelve feet from the ground. Loosely knotted to the branches were numerous handkerchiefs of cotton and silk, of all the hues of the rainbow. These were to be the prizes of those who could scale the tree and secure them.

The spectators were impatient for the sports to begin, and in response to their shrill whistles and impetuous clapping, the signal was given. At the sharp blare of the bugle a scene of wild excitement ensued. Full two-score men, a picturesque rabble by virtue of their very raggedness and squalor, swarmed over the steep wooden barricade and assaulted the gayly-decked tree, each fighting and struggling like a mad-

man, seeking to be the first to climb the tree and thus gain the choicest prizes. The enthusiastic plaudits of the spectators encouraged the contestants, before whose struggle the insecurely planted tree began to shake and quiver. Wilder yet rung forth the applause as the tall Yankee, whose words head this chapter, sprang into the arena, and, with a cat-like activity, leaped upon the writhing mass, making stepping-stones of his fellows' heads and shoulders, then leaping up and grasping the lowest branches, flinging his ungainly limbs around until he fairly secured a foothold.

At this moment the bugle sounded again. The gate of one of the pens was flung open, and a magnificent bull bounded into the arena, bellowing loudly with pain and rage. At this several of the weak-nerved aspirants for fame—this sport, imported from Old Spain, is termed *Monte Parnaso*—freed themselves and started for the barriers, while others, doubtless encouraged by the disappointed cries among the spectators of "*Embolado!*" renewed their struggles with better success.

Bellowing deeply, the bull shook its head, then charged. The rabble scattered amid the



THE NEXT INSTANT HIS LONG, SLENDER KNIFE WAS BURIED TO THE HILT IN THE BEAR'S SIDE.

mocking yells of the spectators. One unfortunate was overtaken and tossed high into the air, fortunately falling upon the safe side of the barrier among the crowd, bruised and frightened but not much hurt, thanks to the large gilt balls that were upon the bull's horns.

Foiled here, and its attention attracted by the noise among the stiff branches—where the gaunt Yankee was seen busily stripping the handkerchiefs—the bull charged the tree, causing it to tremble and sway far out of perpendicular. Yells of ludicrous dismay filled the air as the bull drew back for another plunge. Swift and sure came the stroke, and the overburdened tree was hurled to the ground, those who had succeeded in climbing up, struggling frantically to free themselves from the tangled branches and the aimless clutches of each other. And this confusion became worse confounded as the bull plunged headlong into the dark mass, rendered almost frantic by the thundering cheers that greeted the thrilling, if ludicrous spectacle.

Luckily the Yankee had been pitched clear of the tree, and scrambling to his feet, both hands full of prizes, he gained the barrier and was swung from the arena at the end of a stout scarf in the hands of the tall young man already referred to.

By the time he had cleared his eyes of dust, the scene was ended. Several horsemen had entered, lassoed the bull and tree, dragging both out of the arena. Thanks to the humanity—unappreciated though it was by the spectators who had so freely hissed the appearance of the *embolado*—displayed by the management in rendering the bull well-nigh harmless, the affair ended without death or broken bones, though the Yankee was the only one that profited by that Monte Parnaso.

"Lucky for you, stranger, it wasn't that brute!" exclaimed the young man, as another pen was opened and a huge bull bounded forth, black as jet, with a thick-curved mane that would not have disgraced a lion.

In the animal's hips and flanks were sticking a number of barbed missiles that exploded one by one, goading the bellowing animal to an excess of fury as it plunged around the circle. But magnificent as this brute was, it was powerless to hold the attention of the spectators long. The figure of a man was seen upon the iron-bound cage from whence, by the aid of a pole, he unfastened and swung open the iron door. Swiftly disappearing, the huge cage was slowly tilted forward until a huge grayish ball rolled through the door and fell upon the ground.

In an instant the tumultuous cheering was stilled. In the place of the hairy ball stood an animal that even in this state of half-captivity was terrible and fear-inspiring; a gaunt, half-starved grizzly bear of the largest size.

"Glory to Moses!" uttered the Yankee. "What a all-fired watch-dog that critter would make!"

"If you could only train it," laughed the young man, Mark Bird by name. "But look! it's got its work cut out for it *this* time. Look at the bull!"

"A picayune on the dog, if it breaks me!" cried the Yankee, enthusiastically.

There was no response made to this extravagant offer. Every eye was riveted upon the two animals, every vein throbbing with the hotly leaping blood, and the steadiest nerves were trembling with anticipation. The suspense was not of long duration. Like a black thunderbolt the huge bull plunged forward, glad of a living object upon which to wreak its fury. Rising erect the grizzly met the onset with a blow of its massive paw that staggered the bull; but before the stroke could be repeated, the long black horns were buried in the bear's breast, and the huge brute was forced back against the stout barricade and there pinned fast. The grizzly buried its long snout in the bull's neck, while his hind paws were tearing long strips of flesh from the breast and legs of its assailant.

Deadly and fierce as was the fight, it did not seem to satisfy the spectators. The sport threatened to be too brief, and to lack variety. Hoping to separate the animals, those directly above the scene, yelling loudly, flung whatever missiles they could command down at the beast. Those in the rear pressed forward for a better view, and the jam was so great that the wooden barrier began to bend and crack. A wild yell of terror arose, and in the mad confusion that followed, one ragged wretch was toppled over the railing, with an ear-splitting shriek of awful terror.

Headlong he fell, striking fairly upon the arched back of the bull, thus strangely producing the very effect he had been foremost in seeking. The heavy shock upon its spine appeared to madden the bull, and he fell back, rolling over the shrieking wretch, while the grizzly, streaming blood, plunged forward, and with one mighty stroke, fairly disemboweled the bull.

Meantime the man, bruised and bewildered, struggled to his feet and staggered away from the spot where he had so nearly met his death. Words are powerless to describe the scene that followed. The spectators appeared insane with excitement. All were yelling or shrieking;

some shouting for the *picadors* to aid the unfortunate, others shouting directions to him, shaking cloaks and sashes over the barriers, and calling for him to catch hold and be drawn up; while he seemed utterly bewildered either by his fall or through sheer terror, staggering here and there like a drunken man.

Amid this confusion, a large, powerfully-built, white-bearded man, leaped boldly into the arena, and grasping the fellow, forced him toward the barrier, raising him aloft with apparently little effort. Willing hands grasped the stupefied wretch, while scarfs and belts were lowered to aid the rescuer. None too soon. The grizzly, infuriated by its wounds, was plunging forward with blood-curdling snarls, rearing erect and striking vainly at the feet of the man as he was drawn over the barrier.

Rendered frantic at being balked of its prey, the grizzly drove its powerful claws into the narrow cracks and began scaling the wall, fairly flinging its fore-paws over the top before a hand could be lifted to check its progress. The crowd, thickly sprinkled with women, seemed wild with terror, and to think of nothing but seeking safety in flight. Fortunately a few men were cool-brained, and the sharp detonations of revolvers were added to the uproar. Leaning forward the gray-bearded man dealt the bear a blow upon the snout with his clenched fist that was answered by a howl of angry pain.

Then came a startling crackling—a section of the barrier had given way beneath the weight of the grizzly and the tremendous jam, precipitating full a score of bodies into the blood-stained arena.

Among that number were Mark Bird and his cousin, Kirke Howard. Fortunately both fell clear of the ruins, and obeying nature's first law, they started for the opposite side of the amphitheater. Just as they neared safety, a wild snarling roar caused them to cast a backward glance.

The grizzly bear had extricated himself from under the splintered timbers, and was rushing, open-mouthed, upon the first living object that met its infuriated gaze. This chanced to be a slight-built lad, dressed in a ranchero's suit, and who was just rising to his feet.

The raging beast was too close for successful flight, and with a coolness remarkable in one so young, the lad tore the sash of china crape from his waist and shaking out its folds, sprung nimbly aside, leaving the bear half-blinded by the sash. The next instant his long, slender knife was buried to the hilt in the bear's side.

"Back, Kirke!" shouted Mark, drawing a revolver. "That boy's too brave to be butchered!"

Howard needed not another appeal, and when the mad beast tore the shining crape from its eyes, two revolvers were pouring their leaden contents into its body.

"Run while you can, boy!" shouted Mark Bird, springing in front of the Mexican. "Climb up yonder—we'll cover you—Hurrah!" he screamed, as the huge beast reared erect, then fell heavily backward, wildly pawing the air. A revolver bullet had crashed through the grizzly's brain, entering at the eye.

"You have saved my life, senior; I shall never forget it!" earnestly uttered the youth, then springing forward he mingled with the crowd and was lost to view.

CHAPTER II.

A TEXAN FLOWER.

"I MOVE we get out of this—enough is as good as a feast to a man who don't claim to be a hog! Talk about *fun*!" and Kirke Howard gave a snort of utter disgust as he began scaling the shattered barrier, elbowing his way unceremoniously through the motley crowd toward the place of exit.

"You were sighing for a glimpse of the Texan elephant, and now you've got it," laughed Mark Bird, as they fought their passage through the excited crowd and found themselves once more without the canvas and wooden walls. "I should grumble, if any one. You lit head-first between my shoulders, and I can feel a dent there big enough for a wash-bowl!"

"We were lucky in getting off so well," added Howard, thoughtfully. "But at the same time, when I attend another such performance, I'm going to leave before the after-piece."

"And I—to strike for higher wages unless the management agree to furnish a fair damsel for rescue, instead of a young greaser. Listen—what's in the wind now?" added Mark, glancing back at the huge amphitheater, from the interior of which arose a chorus of wild yells, hoots, cat-calls and other significant sounds of angry disapproval.

Hot-headed Mark pressed forward, eager to discover the cause of disturbance, but was soon driven back by the surging crowd that poured forth from the inclosure in anything but an angelic mood. Prominent among the malcontents, the cousins discovered the tall Yankee who had borne off the honors of the *Monte Parnaso*.

"It's a swindle, gentlemen—I swan tew man! Tew close eout when they haven't done the half they contracted tew dew! Feller-citizens—

ef yeou'll only wait till I kin draw up a petition—"

"S'pose the fence was bu'sted down," interrupted a burly bull-whacker, "didn't we agree to play fence, just so the fun mought go on?"

"They's the hoss-racin', anyhow—they cain't cheat us out o' *that*!" cried another cowboy, evidently disposed to look at the brightest side.

"It takes all sorts of people to make up a world," said Mark, laughing. "You may have heard something of the kind before, but you never saw a more convincing proof of its truth. Think of a living fence to inclose such sports—nobody but a wild and woolly Texan could have dreamed of such a thing—much less have proposed it in sober earnest."

"I have felt as though in a dream ever since we left Galveston—everything and everybody is so exaggerated. It is one constant succession of surprises. The contrasts are so sharp. There! look at that group by the broken-topped live-oak. I couldn't have found a better illustration in a day's ride."

"An angel, by George!" exclaimed Mark.

"Guarded by two satyrs," laughed Kirke.

In the scanty shade cast by the deformed tree, a rough, rickety wagon was standing, covered with a patched and dirty canvas tilt. At the rear end, two gaunt mules were eating from the feed-box. Beside the wagon were three persons, two seated. The larger of these was a rudely-garbed man, shaggy-haired and bushy-bearded. With head upon one side and foot beating time against a wagon wheel, he was torturing a battered violin that could only boast of two strings, producing a series of sounds that would have shamed the howling of a tortured cat. The other was a young woman, yet in her teens, of almost marvelous beauty. It is little to say that her hair was of a rich, golden brown; her complexion clear and free from tan; her cheeks softly suffused; her eyes large, lustrous, of a deep, limpid blue; her lips full and moist; her chin round and dimpled; her neck sloping into perfect shoulders and swelling bust. All this may be said, and yet you can have but a faint and indistinct idea of the reality. There is a certain type of woman that no pen can clearly depict; and she upon whom the cousins were now gazing formed one of that number; nor did her garb, as is so often the case, lend its aid to lighten the work of nature. A plain calico dress, unrelieved by bow or ribbon, met white stockings and beaded moccasins.

The third person, also a woman, was bustling around with wonderful activity, and her tongue was fully as nimble. Short, thin, and angular, with faded hair, eyes and sallow complexion, she formed a strong contrast to her huge, overgrown husband—for the beatified fiddler was no less.

Pausing short as her restless eyes lighted upon the cousins, the sour expression of the little woman's countenance changed to eager interest, and poking the rural Orpheus in the short ribs with a stout cowhide shoe—her both hands were full—she uttered:

"Roust up, you lazy coot! Go ax the gentlemen will they take a bite 'long o' us? Vanish, now, or I'll make kin'lin' wood o' that pesky fiddle, as I've 'lowed to, time an' ag'in."

With ludicrous activity the Texan scrambled to his feet, and holding his loved fiddle out of the way of harm, greeted the cousins and delivered his message with a better grace than might have been expected. Though yet new to the free and easy style of the border, the young men accepted the invitation quite as frankly as it had been given, and five minutes later were seated in the grateful shade, eating, chatting and laughing as though with friends of a life-long standing.

"It wasn't your good looks altogether, gentlemen," said Mrs. Lamb, for thus she had introduced herself, and laughing as she spoke; "twasn't so much that—though I *did* say to Minnie, when you turned on that overgrown warmint—the ugliest critter that grows, I think, an' which my mother—she's dead an' gone come twenty-three years next tatur diggin'—an' she'd ought to know, ef anybody."

Minnie smiled furtively, as the cousins interchanged a quick glance, in doubt as to what answer ought to be made. Fortunately for their sense of politeness, just at that moment Hector Lamb forgot himself and began wrestling once more with the "Arkansaw Traveler." But alack and alas! As his eyes closed and his huge foot straightened out to beat time, the broad sole began patting Mrs. Hector Lamb in the small of the back. As well have been a package of dynamite. The musician doubled up as a sharp elbow indented his ribs, while bow and fiddle went flying over the wagon-top as though suddenly provided with wings. Meekly the giant arose and shambled around to rescue his beloved instrument, and Mrs. Lamb resumed her never-ending skirmish-fire of disjointed questions and assertions.

The cousins found it interesting, or at least amusing, but a transcript would be tedious. Enough that in the hour devoted to dinner Mrs. Lamb covered the entire past, present and a good portion of the future.

Their family consisted of but the three then present; they had driven over from their "homestead," fifty miles distant, to enjoy the sports at San Antonio; had witnessed the prompt action of the cousins in defense of the Mexican youth, to which fact they owed their present felicity.

"I'm done for, Kirke," dolefully exclaimed Mark, as they finally strolled toward the crowd that began to gather at the race-course. "Hit hard, and right to the center. Did you ever see such a beauty? and so modest, so shy, yet arch—"

"And so forth," interrupted Howard. "You have been in the same sad fix twenty times, to my knowledge, Mark, so there is some hopes of your surviving."

"I'll marry her to-morrow—"

"There may be more words than yours about that. Look back—it needs no gift of second sight to read the extent of your chances there!"

A tall, lithe young man, dressed in a suit of gayly-ornamented buck-skin, was greeting Minnie Lamb. Both her hands were in his, and there was an expression upon her uplifted face that could not be mistaken. His face was hidden, but hers betrayed love, deep and entire, and Mark Bird felt a queer pang in his bosom as he took in the scene.

"If he's a better man than I—not unless."

He laughed as he spoke, but there was an undercurrent of earnestness in his voice that Kirke did not fail to note.

"Remember your pledge, lad; remember what we both have sworn. Until that work is done, your hands are bound. I shall hold you to your promise, as I expect you to hold me to mine."

Mark made no reply, and a sober shade was over both faces as they entered the noisy, excited crowd.

There was no regularly surveyed race-course, though a straight half-mile stretch had been duly measured and staked off. There was no pretense at order, no particular rules or regulations, but the crowd made up in fire and enthusiasm for all other deficiencies. Money seemed to be plenty, and was wagered with reckless liberality, recalling the "flush times of the South," when Boston and Fashion battled for the supremacy of the turf. A wild, exciting scene, well spiced with danger. More than one rough-and-tumble fight had already taken place, and though as yet no weapons had been used, there was every prospect of the day's ending in a "gay old circus"—to use the vernacular.

Around the two more prominent horses the crowd was greater, but tall Kirke Howard made a discovery.

"The little Mexican—he's going to ride!"

Just then the crowd rolled aside. The race was about to begin. The lithe Mexican leaped lightly into the saddle, bending low down to catch the whispered instructions of the man whose iron hand controlled the impatiently quivering racer. A man of unusual height, yet whose members were so admirably proportioned that the eye was deceived until a comparison was made with his fellow-men. Straight as a poplar, strong as a bull, active as a panther. Inky-black hair fell in straight locks over his shoulders. When he turned around, a striking face was revealed.

"Did you ever see a more magnificent figure or face?" muttered Mark, his eye kindling.

"A bad face, nevertheless; the face of a man who willingly serves the devil."

"Take a fool's advice, stranger, an' speak them words mighty low when he's nigh to han'," muttered a not unfriendly voice close to Howard's elbow.

"You know him, then?"

"From A to Ampersand," promptly responded the Texan. "They's few in these parts as don't know 'Turn-over,' the Injun, ur Kunnel Overton, as he calls hisself now. Ef they was time—"

But time there was not. The signal was given, and away the rival steeds darted, vanishing amid the cloud of sand flung aloft by their own heels.

The scene which followed baffles description. The crowd seemed insane, as they one and all rushed up the course the sooner to learn which animal had won. Among them were the cousins, carried away by the excitement, yelling with the best, despite the grave interests which had brought them to this wild and lawless region.

Back in triumph pranced the gray horse, proudly bestrode by the young Mexican, while Colonel Overton held the tossing head in check. It seemed almost as though the noble animal knew that it had just won a princely fortune.

Mark Bird uttered an angry exclamation as a strong arm thrust him violently aside. A burly, heavy-built fellow sprung past him with drawn and leveled revolver. The weapon exploded, and the gray racer reared aloft, then plunged heavily forward, a ball in its brain. Like its echo came a second shot, and the hot blood spouted from Overton's face as he whirled around. A single swift glance—then he leaped forward, a long knife flashing in his hand. One more shot—a dull, grating thud—and all was

over. The would-be assassin lay quivering in death, the knife-guard denting his scalp, its point protruding beneath the dead man's chin.

"Hold!" a clear, ringing voice was heard. "Up with your weapons! The man that strikes a blow or burns powder, dies like a dog!"

"The trouble is ended, sheriff," coolly uttered Overton. "The carrion shot my horse and tried to murder me, and I killed him. Any of these gentlemen will say the same."

"It's so, cap'n," put in the Texan who had warned Howard. "I hate the cuss like p'ison, as you know, but he's in the right this time."

"Let's go—I'm sick of this!" muttered Kirke, hoarsely.

Mark was about to comply, when some one breathed in his ear:

"Be at the Golden Harvest to-night—important!"

In amazement he glanced around, but in vain. Whoever had spoken had vanished quite as mysteriously.

CHAPTER III.

WHO WAS IT?

"A MONSTROUS bad speculation from first to last—look at it as you will!" and with an ugly glow in his snake-like eyes Colonel Overton replaced his emptied glass upon the rude table with an angry thump.

He and one other man were the occupants of a small, poorly-ventilated room in one of the square, box-like buildings of which the western end of San Antonio at that date principally consisted. The building, though detached, fronted upon a narrow and gloomy street, and consisted of three small rooms.

The colonel's companion, as far as could be seen, was a tall, well-formed man, something past middle age. His features were fine and regular, and gave evidence that he had been uncommonly handsome before unbridled dissipation stamped its seal upon face and body. He lay upon a rude cot, a blanket flung over his lower limbs and body. More than once a low groan—almost a snarl—was wrung from his lips by the acute pain he was suffering.

"First you must get smashed up—thanks to your childish love of sport. Then that drunken fool must shoot my horse, because he'd bet on the wrong nag, and then give me a mark that will last me for life. I settled him—and that is the only decent piece of work done this day. The devil's in it, I say!"

"Who could have foreseen that he would interfere. He was safe started on a blind trail—there was no one else to interfere. My hurt had nothing to do with it. The boys were steady and willing, only awaiting the signal. But just then up rode that cursed Dashing Ned, at the head of full fifty men. Instead of scattering to see the sport, half of them squatted down before the bank. They never laid aside their weapons, nor even hitched their horses. The boys were watching, and one of them caught Brown's signal. That was enough. The game was up. The Rangers had got wind of the job; but how?"

"That is what we must find out. Are you sure of Brown? He comes of treacherous stock; I never liked the fellow."

"As for myself I'd as soon think of doubting you."

A fleeting smile curled the colonel's lips. Had the injured man caught this, he might well have thought he was giving poor security for Brown's fidelity. But Overton was stroking his mustache, and the long, muscular fingers served as a mask.

"Some one is playing us false. In no other way can we account for those mysterious notes—or else a veritable demon is haunting us!"

A sharp cry parted the injured man's lips. A square slip of stiff white paper floated across the room, seemingly without human agency, and settled down upon the breast of the man upon the cot.

"Another! When will this end?" he groaned.

"When the past is atoned for—when you have suffered as I have suffered."

Clear, yet deep sounded the first words, those following growing fainter and less distinct, as though the speaker was receding.

With an angry curse, Overton sprang to the window and peered forth into the night, but no living object was to be seen; the narrow street seemed utterly deserted. With a troubled expression upon his face he closed and barred the heavy wooden shutter before returning to the bedside.

"Take it off!" hoarsely gasped the trembling wretch. "It is all blood!"

"Or red ink," sneered Overton, regaining his composure all at once. "See! the same old story—a blood-red coffin, and a cross-marked bullet."

"There's a name?" muttered the other.

"Yes—DOUBLE SIGHT, the DEATH SHOT—of course. Some one is playing a dangerous joke—"

"A joke that ends in death! Four times have I seen or heard of that card before to-night. And four dead men have been found—"

"A mere coincidence. Dead men are no rarity in these parts," and Overton laughed, shortly.

"Was it a coincidence that each one of those four were with us when we—"

"Hush!" muttered Overton, as a sharp rap resounded through the building.

The colonel glided to the door, while his companion, with a painful effort, drew a revolver from beneath his head. Overton tapped gently upon the door, and as the sound was imitated, opened it and gave admittance to a short, slight-built man.

"Brown! did you meet anybody in the street—was there any person hanging around the house?" eagerly demanded the crippled man, as Overton rebarred the door.

"No, captain. I made sure of that. It wouldn't be healthy for me if I were seen here, at present. I fear the dogs begin to suspect. I am almost sure that I have been watched for nearly two days past."

"You have been careless—drinking, again, and so let the truth leak out," angrily uttered Overton.

"I look like a man who would hang himself, don't I? If I had given them the faintest clew, I wouldn't be here now. You have no right to accuse me. You refused the duty—"

"Make your report—time presses."

"To the captain, not to you, Colonel Overton."

"Peace—can you two never meet without bandying words?" impatiently interposed the cripple.

"I obeyed your orders to the very letter, captain," quietly answered Brown. "I managed it so that another man struck the trail, and though I contrived that they should not miss a single point, no one could even suspect that I was guiding them. The rest of the boys played their part well; so well that at this time yesterday I could have sworn we would have been a hundred miles away at the hour set for 'opening' the bank. But last night a stranger called Dashing Ned aside, and must have posted him, for within the hour we were taking the back trail. I tried my best to make out who and what the stranger was, but thanks to Double Dan, I failed. He stuck close to me, and I fear smoked my object, for ever since he has hung to me closer than a tick."

"I would give five hundred dollars to know who that stranger was! Could you not make a guess?"

"No. It was dark when he rode up, and he kept beyond range of the firelight. I saw him only for a moment. I made out that he was a large man, and that he wore a full white beard, or else had on a white shirt; I could not swear which."

For a few minutes there was silence, and all the men seemed busied with thoughts anything but agreeable.

"Well, Brown," finally said the man addressed as captain. "I believe you have done the best for us that lay in your power, and I thank you for it. But, if all is as you say, your work in this quarter is done. Can you cut loose from the Rangers, think?"

"If necessary, though that will strengthen whatever suspicions they may entertain. I am at your command, now as ever, captain."

"Then shake them off and make for the upper station. Send back Davis to take your place. Lose no more time than you can help, but don't run any great risk," said the captain, extending his hand.

Overton unbarred the door, but paused in the act of opening it. Some one was coming down the street, singing in a very unsteady and husky voice, varied by an occasional drunken whoop. As he drew opposite the house, the fellow lurched over and fell against the door. The impatient curse upon Overton's lips was checked as he caught a peculiar scratching rap, twice repeated.

"Open and let him in," cried the captain, eagerly.

Overton obeyed, the fellow gliding in, and instantly closing and barring the door, he uplifted one finger in warning.

A moment later there came a quick, elastic tread; it passed by without pausing.

"They ain't no harm in bein' too cautious," chuckled the new-comer, betraying no signs of intoxication. "I saw a feller ahind me that looked like he wanted to know whar I was bound, but I reckon I throwed him off the trail. I run into the Golden Harvest, an' he follered me. While I was gittin' outside of a couple o' glasses o' p'izen I tuck the critter's fortygraph."

"Who was he?" asked the captain.

"A stranger to me. A whalin' big feller with a long white b'ard—the same galoot as helped that critter out at the show, an' then knocked the grizzly down."

The three men interchanged quick glances, and the same suspicion arose in the mind of each. They believed that this spy and the man who had warned the Ranger captain of the plot to rob the San Antonio bank was one and the same person. If so, the toils were surely closing around them.

"It mebbe wasn't me he was a'ter," resumed the spy. "He didn't stay long. Jest as he went out I ketched a glimpse of Brownie, thar, passin' by, but didn't think it best to jine him. I waited a good bit, then struck out. Jest as I

turned into this street I ketched sight o' the old rip, and to make sure, I come the drunken man over him."

"You should have passed on; but, since you are here, what have you to report? What success?"

"Big, boss! ef it ain't wu'th a week's drunk, you kin kick me! I struck trail two days ago, an' never left it ontel I sucked the lemon dry. What you hearn was true. Those two young fellers was fresh from Galveston. They've bin axin' the same questions here. One on 'em is called Kirke Howard, t'other is Mark Bird. They're cousins, from Louisiany. They're huntin' fer a man named David Woodson."

"You can place them on *that* trail, Overton," and the captain smiled grimly. "I suspected that he was at the bottom of this resurrection. They are welcome to all they can learn through him!"

"They's more a-comin', boss," soberly added the spy. "They've bin up to the old ranch. They was comin' from thar when I fust struck them. I knowed they was safe, an' so I tuck a scout around. They'd bin to the grave. It'd bin fresh opened. An' they was a skull layin' to one side. It'd just bin dug up, fer the dirt was wet on it. I don't know—"

The spy gave a convulsive start, whirled half-way round, then fell heavily to the floor.

The three men seemed petrified with astonishment. The spy had fallen like one death-stricken, yet no person had touched him; there had been no report of gun or pistol.

Overton was the first to recover himself, and, stooping, he lifted the body in his arms. *Body*, for the spy was dead! Yet neither blood nor wound was visible!

CHAPTER IV. THE PINK DOMINO.

In a hasty whisper Mark Bird told his cousin what words had so strangely come to his ears, but in vain they sought to discover the speaker. All present appeared deeply and solely interested in the turn taken by what promised, at one time, to end in a free fight.

The young man who had so authoritatively interfered, after keenly questioning those around him, was convinced that Colonel Overton had acted solely in self-defense, and after asking if the dead man had any friends present, bade two of his men convey the corpse to the calaboose for identification.

"You are satisfied, then, sheriff, that I am not to blame for this little affair?" politely asked Overton, holding a handkerchief to his lacerated cheek.

"Quite. You acted just as I should. The man must have been drunk or crazy."

"They take matters cool enough!" said Kirke, as the two cousins turned away from the scene of blood. "But that voice—are you sure you understood the words aright?"

"I heard them as plain as I hear myself. But the proof is easy. If there is any such place in town as the Golden Harvest—"

"You couldn't find a better place fer raal up-an'-down fun in seven States, stranger!"

The cousins turned in surprise, for the prompt assertion seemed in answer to Mark's words. A short, wiry little man was close behind them, gazing benignly upon them with his one greenish gray eye, and slowly nodding his head by way of emphasis.

"Evenin', gentlemen. I don't make it a p'int to cut in when 'tain't my deal, as a gen'al thing, but you tetched me in my tender p'int, then."

This explanation did not lessen the surprise. Though there was but the one man within earshot, *two* different voices were speaking at one and the same time. And both voices uttered the same words. The little man was winking and blinking as he nodded before them, but his lips did not appear to move.

There came a shrill, cackling chuckle, blending with a deeper, rumbling guffaw, and once more the double voice was heard:

"You're new in these parts, I reckon, gentlemen, or you'd hearn tell o' me 'fore this. Double Dan, the sports call me. Does look kinder funny tell you git sort o' 'quainted. They was a big mistake made, some'ers, when I was hatched. 'Pears like the 'tention was to have *twins*, but all two voices was putt into one karkidge—which is me. That's why they call me Double Dan," and the little man nodded and rolled his one eye around in a manner so whimsical that, taking into consideration his ludicrously combined voices, the cousins could not restrain their laughter.

"They's money in it, too! Great sarpints! ef you could only see me in a rampagin' jamboree—an' me a-lettin' off steam! you'd think they was a hull rijiment on the war-path! But you was talkin' of the Harvest, when I came up."

"What sort of place is it?" asked Mark.

"Tiger—lots on 'em! You kin chaw or git chawed, jest as *easy*!"

"A gamblin' hell, I suppose?"

"Bet ye—suar' deal, too! But unless you're lucky, you don't want to invest. They *do* say the sharp as runs it hes sold his soul to the old boy. I wouldn't swar it, but of all the luck, his is the outdoonest! The game is run fa'r, though. I watched 'em three nights han'-run-

nin', with a barker in each pocket, but I never got a chance to bu'st a cap."

"It will be open to-night, I suppose?"

"It don't never shet up."

"You appear pretty well posted," interrupted Howard. "Do you know a man named David Woodson?"

"I mought," was the slow response, and the twinkling eye suddenly became fixed.

"There's fifty dollars in my pocket for the person that places me in communication with him."

"They's plenty in these parts as would do it fer less money, but my price runs higher. Mebbe ef you'd tromp on my corns, or lend me a wibe on the bugle, I might 'commodate ye. I kin show ye whar he putts up, ef you like—Thar's my call," he exclaimed, as a shrill whistle floated to their ears. "Ef I kin, I'll see ye to-night at the Harvest."

"At last!" exclaimed Howard, his eyes glowing. "He knows our man; he shall lead us to him at the muzzle of a revolver, if no other means will do."

"Easy, old fellow. You heard him say that he would meet us at the Harvest to-night. If he refuses when he knows what we want, then will be time enough to boil over. He cannot give us the slip, anyway. That double voice would mark him wherever he went."

Shortly after supper the cousins sallied forth, having gleaned all necessary information from the waiter who attended them at their meals. The building was easily found; a commodious structure, situated near the heart of the city. A huge red glass globe hung over the doorway, bearing the legend GOLDEN HARVEST. There was no doorkeeper. Admittance was free to all. The large square room was fairly lighted by a huge chandelier depending from the ceiling, holding a dozen oil lamps. The only games in operation were three faro lay-outs, at the upper end of the room. Near the back were scattered a number of small round tables.

"They're doing a land-office business!" muttered Mark, as his eye rapidly took in the crowd with which each table was surrounded where faro was being played. "And there's your man with the two voices. I suspected him of being a 'capper,' but he's playing too earnestly for that. Now what's the programme?"

"You understand the game. Go play a little. We may be watched. I'll manage to get what we want out of this fellow, Double Dan. Play money, not chips, so you can leave at a nod. There's a place open; drop in," muttered Howard.

Mark slipped into position at the center-table, while Howard stood behind Double Dan. That worthy was playing a keen, rapid, yet closely-calculated game, and every motion betrayed how familiar he was with each detail. Yet ill-luck followed every wager he made, the cards turning against him without an exception. Yet there could be no question of foul play, for the bank was losing quite heavily at every deal. For a few turns Double Dan sat idle, then placed the small amount of his pile of chips upon the queen to win. A single turn, and the queen lost.

"Bu'sted! I'm goin' to shoot myself—in the neck!" squeaked and rumbled Double Dan, arising.

Kirke Howard caught his eye, and made a covert signal. Double Dan winked approvingly, and crossing the room to the sideboard duly shot himself in the neck—with a glass of whisky.

"Are you ready to earn that fifty, my friend?" asked Howard, in a subdued tone, seeing that the negro waiter was eying them curiously.

"No, I ain't," and Double Dan faced the young man.

"You said you would show me where he lived—"

"Whar he putts up, stranger. I didn't say lives, fer that would be a lie. The only Dave Woodson I ever knowed, is dead; pegged out ten-year ago."

"Impossible! I received a letter from him not two months ago, written in this very town!"

"Somebody stole his name, then. I planted Dave with my own han's. That Injun Turn-over wiped him out. I kin bring a dozen boys as witnesses. Dave never writ you no letter, 'cause paper couldn't stan' the pressure whar he is—not much!" grinned Double Dan.

Kirke Howard stood like one dumbfounded. If this David Woodson had died so long ago, who had written the letter that now lay next his heart, seeming to scorch his skin? Were the contents a lie, as well as the signature? Was the mystery which haunted his life never to be solved?

"My time's up, stranger," said Double Dan, at length. "Ef ever you want to learn anythin' more 'bout Dave that was, jest hunt up the Rangers an' ax fer Double Dan. So long, mate!"

Mechanically Kirke Howard returned the salute, then dropped into a seat at one of the round tables, troubled and bewildered. Bowing his head upon his arms, he remained motionless, thinking, lost to his surroundings. If any one observed him, they fancied him drunk, and passed him by without another thought.

When Mark Bird took his seat at the faro

table, he did not intend to let himself become interested in the game, but there was a spice of the true gamester in his composition, and as he won several nominal stakes, he forgot the warning of his friend, and soon had eyes for naught save the game. Fortune stood his friend, and he had won several hundred dollars, when he became sensible of a faint, subtle perfume, strangely out of place amidst that liquor and tobacco-scented crowd. A light hand touched his shoulder, and a soft, musical voice uttered:

"Pardon, senor. Oblige me by 'coppering' the knave."

A small, neatly-gloved hand was holding several gold coins; a round, white arm, a short lace sleeve, a neck of dazzling purity and rare shapeliness, then a pink satin mask from behind which had issued the request. This is what Mark saw as he raised his eyes in wonder.

"I wish to play—I cannot reach the table; that is why I presumed to trouble you, senor," added the musical voice.

Flushing hotly, Mark rose from his seat, making way, unheeding the angry scowls and even curses with which his crowding was greeted by those to whom the sight of a woman at the tables was not such a rarity. With the best bow he could command on the spur of the moment, Mark begged her to accept his chair.

"But I am spoiling your game, senor!"

"I was playing simply to kill time. I would much rather watch your play, if you will permit me."

"You will learn little, I fear," and the domino laughed softly as she slipped into the proffered seat. "Your gold, senor. I did not beg that, also," and she motioned him to take up his winnings.

"As a favor, please stake it for me. Fortune must smile upon so fair a wooer," Mark whispered, his lips almost touching her shell-like ear.

"Together, then," and the woman emptied a purse of gold upon the little pile. "We will be partners, senor."

"For life, if you will, lady!" and as two wondrous eyes flashed upon him through the pink domino, Mark felt that the words, prompted by a spirit of gallantry, were repeated in his heart of hearts.

For one moment their eager eyes met, then the mask turned her head and placed gold upon several of the cards. One versed in the game would have seen that she was betting at random, and, his icy calm broken by this discovery the dealer elevated his eyebrows with a curious glance. He saw Mark bending over the mask, whispering in her ear, and his lip curled with an amused contempt. He saw that another and deeper game was being played.

"My last stake—and lost!" laughed the mask. "No, senor," as Mark eagerly produced his pocket-book. "I will play no more this evening. I am unlucky. Besides, it is very close in this crowd. I am almost stifled!"

"Pray allow me," and Mark drew her little hand through his arm. "It is cooler over here, and we can converse without fear of being overheard. You will favor me for a few moments?"

"I shall be glad of the rest. I was very foolish in coming here; and yet—I do not regret it."

Mark thrilled from head to foot at this speech, for it was—or else fancy deceived him—accompanied by the faintest imaginable pressure upon his arm. He tried to speak, but for the life of him he could not utter a word just then. Selecting a corner table, he beckoned to the waiter and ordered refreshments.

"I have been wondering when and where we have met before to-night," he said, at length. "Though you so cruelly conceal your face, I am almost certain that this is not our first meeting."

"I was at the sports, to-day. I saw you, senor. It was a very brave act, your risking your life for that boy."

"'Twas nothing—and you recognized me, again?"

"Yes. Only for that, I would not have thought of playing to night. I saw you. I felt that I must speak to you. Do not think me too bold in admitting this, senor. I am a Spanish woman. We are ruled by warm hearts, rather than cold reason. And yet—I see now that I was wrong. What an opinion you must have formed of me!"

With a half-choked sob, the domino bowed her head upon her hands. Forgetting where he was—forgetting that a hundred eyes might be watching his every gesture—Mark stole one arm around the dainty waist, and gently took possession of her hands. But with a swift, eel-like motion the mask freed herself, with an exclamation of half-anger, half-reproach, casting a swift glance around as though fearing his rash act had attracted observation.

A low, gasping sound parted her lips, and she sat as though petrified, her eyes riveted upon the face of a man who had just entered the room. Mark followed the direction of her glance, and recognized the white-bearded man who had performed so bold an act in rescuing the injured man at the bull-fight.

Unconscious of the interest he was causing, the stranger paused at the center-table, and uttered a peculiar sound. The dealer raised his eyes, and, as he did so, turned pale as death.

"Please tell me what is the limit to-night, friend," uttered the gray-beard, in a deep, yet pleasant-sounding voice.

"There is no limit," slowly dropped from the gambler's lips.

"Good!" and the stranger's voice rung out sharply. "I choose the ace to win, and *wager this, and my life against yours!*"

As he spoke the stranger dropped a heavy buck-skin bag upon the table, his glowing eyes seeming to pierce the dealer through and through.

Players and spectators alike drew aside. There was something in the stranger's demeanor that awed them. The dealer glanced swiftly around the room, then, placing a cocked revolver before him, began the deal.

"The ace wins—I claim my stakes!" and blended with the wild, exultant words, the stranger's pistol explodes.

The dealer fell forward, dead. A heavy chair whistled through the air, and the chandelier was shattered to atoms. All was dark. A scene of horrible confusion followed. Mark Bird grasped the pink domino, but ere he could move further he was stricken to the floor!

CHAPTER V.

NEWS THROUGH THE WINDOW.

MARK BIRD opened his eyes, and stared around him in stupid amazement. He found himself in a small, square room, through the one window of which the red beams of the setting sun were streaming. He believed that he could recognize the room, but what had occurred—why did his head feel so queer?

At the sound he made, Kirke Howard came forward, and as he peered into the wide-open eyes of his cousin, a bright, glad smile chased the uneasy expression from his face.

"Good enough, old fellow! How do you think you find yourself after the racket?"

"All mixed up! That sun yonder should be the moon, this room is too small, you ain't half the crowd you should be—and my head's as big as a bushel-basket! What does it all mean, and where was I when it took place? That's what gets me!"

"It's all right end up, Mark," laughed Kirke. "You drink this stuff, like a little man, and I'll rub the cobwebs out of your eyes. Somebody lent you a little tap, last night, and you've been sleeping ever since."

"And the lady—what of her?" eagerly interrupted Mark.

"All in good time. Do as I bid you, or I'll not open my head for a week—that's flat!" and Howard held the draught to his patient's lips.

Mark, making a virtue of necessity, meekly swallowed the potion, then lay back upon his pillow with an expectant look in his feverish eyes. Howard looked at him closely, and saw that nothing less than a full explanation would quiet him.

"You remember where we went that evening?"

"Last night? of course. To the Golden Harvest," promptly responded Mark. "I remember all, up to when the lights went out. Somebody struck me, I suppose?"

"Somebody or something. You know I left you, to get what we wanted to learn, out of that Double Dan. I managed to get him to one side, and pumped him. He said that David Woodson was dead—that he buried him, himself—ten years ago!"

"But that letter! he was lying—you did not offer him enough," interrupted Mark, excited.

"He swears that some one else must have written the letter. He offered to bring a dozen witnesses to prove that the genuine David Woodson was dead, and buried. He spoke no more than the truth, as I am now convinced. I have hunted up the witnesses and heard their story. I rode over to Buzzard's Roost, where the grave is. I opened the grave, and found the proof. In a fight with the greasers Woodson had his skull broken, and the surgeon mended it with a Spanish dollar, marked with a cross. I found that dollar; and here it is."

Mark fingered the curious relic thoughtfully. The mystery of that letter troubled him. If not Woodson, then who did write it? If the signature was false, could any dependence be placed upon the rest?

"My thoughts were the same, at first," added Kirke, reading the doubts of his cousin. "But, don't forget what we discovered at the old ranch. We know that the wrong man was buried there. Since he was not killed with the others, he may be alive still. The letter may be true, although the name of a dead man was signed to it."

"Where is this Buzzard's Roost—how far from here?"

"Nearly sixty miles, south-west from here."

"You must have ridden hard," said Mark, dryly.

"I was anxious," hastily replied Kirke; "and did not spare my horse. But let that pass. About last night. I was seated at a table not far away when you left off playing for a softer game."

"Easy, Kirke! That lady—"

"Exactly. That lady was everything she should be, I have no doubt. At first I was even

inclined to envy you your luck—and that, you know, is saying a good deal for me. Well, I watched you; if you will have your interviews take place in a public room, you can expect no less. I saw the lady start when that man with the big white beard entered, and naturally that drew my attention to him. I heard his wager, and saw the end. I saw the chair sail through the air and knock the chandelier to pieces, and I knew right well what would follow. I shouted to you, but the uproar was so great that I could barely hear my own voice. Some one sprung swiftly past me, so close that my clothes were touched. I stumbled forward, falling over you. You were lying flat upon your back, and as I fell, my hand rested upon your breast. There was a hand in your pocket. I felt it distinctly, though only for a moment; then it was jerked away. But in that brief instant, I knew that the hand was small and delicate; and it was gloved."

"You don't mean—I won't believe it!" cried Mark, his eyes glowing vividly.

"I am simply telling you what I experienced. You must draw your own conclusions," quietly responded Kirke. "I made a blind grasp in the dark, and my hand closed upon a round, bare arm. Before I could make sure of my prize, I received a severe blow upon the head, and fell again, almost senseless."

"All this time the gayest kind of a circus was going on over and around the faro tables, and I could hear the bullets spattering all around us. I managed to drag you into one corner, and crouched down over you; it was the best I could do, for I was too faint to bear you outside, even if I could have made way through the crowd. A few minutes later—it seemed as many hours to me—the sheriff entered at the head of his men, and quelled the row as by magic. Lights were brought in, and damages counted up. It was a sickly-looking outfit. The furniture was shattered, the banks gobbled, and three poor fellows laid out for good."

As soon as I could, I got help and had you carried in here, after giving our names and address to the sheriff, in case we should be wanted. Then I hunted up a doctor—and here you are."

"What was the matter with me? Anything besides a rap on the head?"

"Nothing; but that was quite enough. You have lain like a log ever since. I've not taken off my clothes for three—" Kirke bit his lip, but the mischief was done.

"You did not spare your horse, old fellow, and you needn't spare me," laughed Mark. "Tell me how long I have lain here?"

"This is the third day, if you will have it."

"That accounts for my feeling so hollow, then! And I'm hungry enough to eat a live wolf. Suppose you skirmish around and scare me up a supply of grub. Don't be too stingy about it, neither."

Relieved at Mark's bearing the discovery of his long stupor so well, Howard hastened to obey, and when he returned with a heaping tray, he found his cousin up and dressed, looking little the worse for his narrow escape from death. Mark laughed at his look of consternation, and pitched into the viands with a vigor that, more than aught else, reassured Kirke.

"You say you watched us," Mark finally uttered, though with an evident effort. "Mind, now, I won't believe a single word against her; you can't change my trust and faith in her, but I'm curious to learn just what you thought of her, anyway. Come, now!"

"I thought her actions were those of one who was using every possible art to gain a certain end. It is possible that love was at the bottom of it all; but since I could take my oath that I felt her hand in your breast-pocket, and caught hold of her arm a moment later, I can only believe that she was after the papers you carried in that very pocket not a dozen hours before. And she would have had them, too, only for your pocket getting torn at the show."

Mark was about to reply, when there was a crashing of glass, and a small missile fell upon the table. The broken pane of glass told whence it had come, and with one accord the cousins sprang to the opening. The street was deserted. Not a living being was to be seen. Howard ran down-stairs and outside, but his search was in vain. Nor were his questions better rewarded. No person had been noticed upon that side of the house.

"It is a letter," said Mark, as he returned, pointing to a bit of paper which had been neatly wrapped around a pebble.

"If all mail is delivered in a like manner, I wonder who pays the glazier?" but Howard's laugh was anything but natural as he picked up the strangely-delivered missive.

The contents were brief, but significant, and read as follows:

"MESSRS. HOWARD & BIRD:

"GENTLEMEN—You are working a blind lead here. There was an error in the letter you received. For San Antonio, read San Marcos. For certain reasons, all of which will be duly explained, D. W. is unable to meet you here. If you are ready to follow up the hint he has given you, take the trail for San Marcos to-morrow. Ask there for Chris. Morris. He has his instructions and will place you in communication with D. W."

The note was without a signature, unless a rude drawing at the bottom of a Spanish dollar, crossed, may be said to be a signature.

In silence Howard produced a letter from his pocket-book and compared the two. Both had been written by a hand that had evidently been long out of practice with the pen. Except in this respect there was no similarity whatever between the two.

The cousins consulted long and earnestly. Assured as they were that David Woodson was dead and buried, they could not banish the suspicion that there was a deep plot working against them. And yet—there was one grain of truth in the first letter. It told them that the man who had been buried nearly twenty long years ago was not the man whose name was carved upon the rude wooden headboard that marked the grave.

"We will go and see," at length decided Howard. "There is no use in our waiting here. There may be something in it. If not—if there is mischief meant, we are not infants. Our hands can guard our heads."

Their course of action fairly settled, the cousins lost little time. They made all necessary preparations, and by questioning the landlord, found that San Marcos was distant some fifty miles. A visit was paid the surgeon, who stated that by riding early and late, lying over during the heat of the day, Mark might make the trip without fear of a relapse.

That evening Mark stole forth alone to see if he could learn anything concerning the pink domino, but without success. She had disappeared as might a veritable vision.

Early in the morning the cousins rode out of San Antonio—rode forth to meet their fate!

CHAPTER VI.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

CREEPING slowly, silently through the tall grass and reeds, now pausing beside a tree-trunk or clump of bushes, now gliding swiftly across an open, grassy space, with glittering black eyes bent to the ground as though reading a trail. An untrained eye would have seen nothing, yet the experienced trail-hunter knew right well that his prey had passed that way, not an hour earlier. He could trace the outlines of a small, moccasined foot where the grass-blades seemed perfect and unbroken; he could point to a single upturned leaf among hundreds, and say: the passage of a human form did this.

Winding through the tangled shrubbery, the trailer reaches the sloping bank of the little river. The moccasined footprints are still before him. He knows that his prey is near, for they lead down the clayey bank to the water's edge. He slowly parts the leafy branches and cautiously peers forth. A peculiar glow fills his eyes, and his lips curl in an exultant smile until the white, pointed teeth glisten like the fangs of a panther. He withdraws his head like a turtle into its shell, and utters the harsh, jarring screech of the blue-jay. From across the deep but narrow and sluggish stream comes the ludicrous *tweetle-tweetle-tweetle* of its mate.

Once more he peers forth. His victim remains motionless. The sounds are too common and too well executed to arouse suspicion that evil is brewing. In silence he retreats and as stealthily strikes the river a few rods further down. Just beneath him is the dirt-crowned roots of a tree which has fallen into the water, its broken top nearly touching the opposite shore. Upon a rude seat, improvised with sticks and grass, near the center of the stream, a young woman is seated, fishing. So the slender pole she is holding would indicate, but there is a far-away expression upon her fair face, a dreamy look in her deep-blue eyes that tell of a heart and mind far away from her present occupation.

The dark face of the trailer flushed hotly, and an evil look filled his eyes as he gazed upon every detail of that fair face and glorious form. A wondering oath broke from his lips.

"I have been blind as a mole! To think that I have let such a treasure escape me for years! She is lovelier than her mother ever was—and I waded through blood for her! There is many a chief would give me a fortune for such a squaw!"

In his eagerness to gain a less obstructed view of the fair fisher, the trailer bore too heavily upon the edge of the bank, and a portion of earth gave way. He made a desperate effort to recover his balance, but in vain. Aroused by the rattle of falling clods, the maiden, aroused from her reverie, glanced hastily around, just in time to catch a glimpse of the spy as he rolled down the bank and disappeared behind the earth-covered roots of the tree. She started up in alarm, but ere she could make any attempt at escape the head of the spy was elevated above the mound, and a voice addressed her:

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Minnie. I just stopped to ask what luck you've had, fishing."

There was something in the words, added to the mud-bedaubed visage, that caused the maiden to laugh, despite her fright. But this was abruptly cut short as the man drew himself up and leaped lightly upon the tree-trunk, thus cutting her off from the shore. Stooping, he

filled his hands with water and washed the mud from his face. Then, seated upon the tree-trunk, he produced tobacco and a pipe, coolly eying the young woman while he loaded the pipe and struck a match. Then, with a quiet smile, he repeated his question:

"What luck have you had fishing, my dear?"

"None. It is a bad day. I am going back to the house. Stand aside and let me pass, Colonel Overton," shortly replied Minnie Lamb, winding up her line.

"Your patience is in fault, not the fish or weather, Minnie. Throw in again, and if you don't catch a bite in ten minutes I'll forfeit a new dress," drawled Overton, not moving.

"I want nothing of your dress—still less of you," angrily replied the girl. "Stand aside, or I'll call for help."

"To whom? The house is empty, for I stopped there first. The old woman and her white nigger have gone to Austin, on purpose to leave me a clear field."

"'Tis false!" and Minnie stamped her foot in anger. "They have nothing in common with you. They loathe and hate you—I have heard them say so a thousand times."

"Did you ever hear them say *why*?" grinned Overton. "I can tell you. Because they fear me. Because I hold a secret of theirs; in the hollow of my hand rests their life or death. With one word I could give them over to the rope. This is why they hate me—and it is one reason why they have gone away and left you alone this day. I warned them that I was coming here to claim my rights. I gave them their choice: to tell you the whole truth, or else to go away on some pretense and leave the matter to me. Because they were too tender-hearted—that is the excuse they made; they had learned to love you so—bah! what matter? They are gone; we are here together. I, to claim my natural rights; you, to yield obedience."

"You are either drunk or crazy. In either case I will not listen to your falsehoods any longer. Stand aside and permit me to pass, quietly, or—"

"Or what?" sneered Overton, as Minnie paused.

"I will clear the way myself!" cried the maiden, swinging her fishing-pole around with a swift motion, straight for his head.

But Overton flung out one hand and received the stroke upon his palm, then holding the pole as in a vise, laughing at Minnie's vain attempt to wrest it free.

"You are your father's daughter, all over!" he said, approvingly.

"If he were here you would not be laughing."

"Indeed! pray who told you anything about your father? You were too young to remember much, and I am pretty confident that pair of Lambs never spoke of him where you could hear. I suppose you mean our friend, Fiddling Hector, when you speak of father?"

"He is my father—you would not dare call him that to his face!" panted Minnie, her eyes aflame.

"I have called him worse, many a time," sneered Overton, pressing down the burning tobacco. "He is my dog, to come and go at my beck and nod. His wife is the better man of the two, but she, too, is under my thumb. I admit that they have called you their child, and have raised you as such; but there is not one drop of their blood flows in your veins. And if you knew all, you would thank Heaven upon your bended knees that such is the case."

"If they are not my parents, then who am I? But I will not believe it! You are lying to me—it is false from beginning to end!" cried the maiden; but she dropped the pole—the sole barrier between her and him, while her frame quivered with strong agitation.

"You do believe it—something in your heart tells you that what I say is true," uttered Overton, in a changed voice, his eyes holding the maiden enchained as a serpent charms the fluttering bird. "You feel that those two are not your parents. Already your heart disowns them. You feel that you come of better blood—higher birth; and you are right. I can tell you of your parents, and I am the only person living who can do so, for their lips are sealed."

"Tell me—of my mother—" faltered Minnie, speaking like one in a dream or under mesmeric influence.

Overton smiled as he saw this. In that moment he looked like the very prince of evil. Never moving his burning gaze from the maiden's eyes, he spoke, slowly:

"The woman you have been taught to believe your mother, has—or had until yesterday—a gold locket and chain. In that locket are two portraits—"

"Of her mother and father. I have seen them," uttered Minnie, mechanically.

"So she told you; but she lied. The originals of those portraits were of no kin to her. You have seen them, you say? Was there nothing familiar—did the sight arouse no old, almost forgotten memories in your heart? Look again—catch!"

As he spoke Overton tossed the girl a small metal locket and chain. Still acting as though under some subtle spell, Minnie touched

the spring. The locket opened, revealing two fairly executed portraits on ivory. For a brief space she gazed in silence, then slowly shook her head.

"Hang it around your neck. Guard it well, for that trinket is worth a heavy ransom. So; you cannot remember. And yet, those are the faces of your own father and mother."

The maiden started, and for a moment it seemed as though she would lose her foothold, but grasping a broken branch, she struggled bravely to conquer her agitation.

"I am telling you nothing more than I can prove," added Overton, knocking the ashes from his pipe. "It is a long story, but the principal points can be summed up in a few words. I saw your parents married. They were intimate friends of mine, though they were rich and proud, while I was but a wild, untrained lad fresh from the prairies. Some day I will tell you how we became friends; I have not time now. When you were three years old there was a terrible tragedy. A house was robbed, set fire, and burned down. There was talk of even worse—of murder. Two charred bodies were taken from the ruins; those of a man and a woman. It was supposed that a little child had been totally consumed. But that part was false. The child was saved; for what purpose, and how, you will learn later. One man committed the crime, though his wife helped him to plan it. He was a soft, half-silly fellow, and the sight of the blood his hand had shed, unsettled his brain still more. They fled, and took the child with them. I struck a clew, followed it up, and finally run them to earth."

"That man and wife were Hector and Nancy Lamb; the child—can you not guess?"

"You expect me to believe this?" and there was the old, proud ring to her voice as she drew her lithe form erect. "I will—when you repeat it face to face with my father and mother—not before. Your eyes tell me that you are lying. I will listen to you no longer. Let me pass!"

"What I have told you is truth, whether you believe it or not. When you leave this tree you accompany me. If you are curious to know *why*, there has a large fortune been left to your parents or their heirs. Through you, I intend to finger that money. With this intention I have claimed you of the Lambs. Come—there is no use in playing shy."

As he spoke Colonel Overton arose and slowly approached the maiden, seeking to hold her with his burning gaze, as he had but a brief time before. He smiled triumphantly, for he believed that he was succeeding, for Minnie stood as motionless as a statue of stone.

He extended one hand to grasp her arm. The maiden suddenly stooped, evading his grasp, and with a desperate effort fairly pushed him from the log, into the water, then sprung forward and grasped the hickory fishing-pole. He arose to the surface, making an effort to grasp the log, but the heavy pole descended upon his head, with all the force of the maiden's arm.

Stunned, he sunk beneath the surface, and Minnie sprung ashore—only to find herself close locked in brawny, naked arms!

CHAPTER VII. HECTOR'S MISTRESS.

At the very moment when Minnie Lamb was checked in her bold attempt to escape the toils so cunningly wound around her, Hector Lamb was performing an even more desperate attempt. Long before that day's dawn, the pair of unequally matched lambs had started for Austin in the old dirty-white tilted wagon. Mistress Nancy was in a more than usual acrid humor; her biting tongue wagged with the swift regularity of the fly-wheel of a machine working double tides. Meekly the giant submitted to his tongue-lashing, but as the team of ragged mules bore them nearer the end of their journey, a wild, daring and tremendous plot was slowly shaping itself in the half-addled brain of Hector Lamb. Could his better-half have read his thoughts? Luckily for Hector, she did not even suspect.

"You onhitch the team, and mind—you stay by while they're eatin', an' see nobody don't steal thar feed; you hear?" sharply cried Mistress Nancy, as she sprung to the ground and loaded her meek slave with the various articles of "garden truck," butter and eggs, which it was her purpose to trade out.

In silence Hector unloaded himself, then left the store as Nancy supposed to faithfully carry out her instructions. Had she only eyes in the back of her head!

Slipping behind the door and assuring himself that she was not peering through the crack, Hector Lamb clenched his fist and recklessly shook it at the center panel of the door.

"Yer mother chawed snuff, yer father was a hog-thief; 'nd you dassent take it up!"

The panel stared at him blankly. With a contemptuous sniff, Hector Lamb slouched his ragged hat over one eye, inflated his mighty chest, and with nose high in the air he turned his back upon his charge and sailed down the street with a lofty air of independence that caused more than one acquaintance to stare after him in mute amazement. This did not escape Hector's

eye, and his newly-found bravery was not a little flattered thereat. With a reckless disregard of consequences he returned their greeting and declared that they must join him in celebrating his birthday. Turning into a convenient saloon, his health was drunk with all due solemnity.

"You're lookin' wonderful peart to-day, Heck," and the speaker winked an aside to his fellows. "I see you an' the old woman come in. She was lookin' kinder down in the mouth, I thought. You keep too tight a rein on her, pard. Better give her head, oncet in awhile—they works all the kinder for it."

"It's easy to tell *you* never was married, Tom," quoth Hector, loftily eying the grinning Texan and pushing his glass over for another supply of Dutch courage. "You slack up on the lines jest one inch, an' the durned, contrary critters 'll strip the harness like a mize. You cain't tell me. I've bin thar—I hev! For instance. You know my old woman. They ain't a kinder-hearted, quieter critter in seven States than she is—long as she feels the cairb. She went jest like a clock. But you know me. I'm so durned soft-haired. I thought it looked kinder low down fer a big, overgrown lummix like me to be settin' down on her *all* the time. So I did as you say. I let up on the cairb. How did the thing work? They was a hummin'-bird on wheels, right off, an' that hummin'-bird was my old woman. You could 'a' knocked me over with a corn-stalk, gentlemen. I didn't think it was in her. An' yit, it wasn't bad to take. I kinder liked it, fer a change. But it's jest like them wimmien. When they git a soft thing, they never know when to let up. No more *she* didn't. She jest peeled an' went in fer the hull hog. I tried the cairb, but she jest kicked up an' tore the breechin' all to thunder. Then I knowed the time was come fer me to putt my foot down. I says to her, says I, 'Nancy, you need a dressin' down, an' what you need I'm duty bound fer to give ye.' When she see how I spoke, she cooled down, an' promised to do better, ef I'd only fergive—"

"You, Hec—tor!"

The stern husband turned toward the door, and he knew that Nemesis had overtaken him. Her eyes glowing, her face white with rage, Mistress Nancy stood upon the threshold, a black-snake whip in her hand. She had overheard the poor braggart's boasting. The very enormity of his sin was his safeguard for the present.

With an air that was almost queenly, she stepped into the room, and pointed to the door, her eyes transfixing Hector. Without a word he slunk out of the room, not heeding the voice of the bar-tender, who clamored loudly for pay for the liquor consumed.

"You can come to me fer pay," quietly responded Mrs. Lamb. "I'll pay you long's my whip holds out, and then I'll buy another!" A pistol-like crack of the wicked black-snake emphasized her threat, and with one white glare of contemptuous defiance she left the room.

She found Hector at the wagon, unhitching the mules.

"Gimme that wallet you stole out o' my redicule. Ef you've spent a cent, it 'll be the wuss fer you. Now mind: you stay right here. You don't want to let me go huntin' you up ag'in."

That was a miserable ride home for poor Hector. There was no possibility of escape, and Dame Nancy made good use of her opportunity. Dull and thick-skinned as he was, it is a question whether Hector did not suffer more acutely beneath her barbed-tongue than he would had she made use of the pliant black-snake.

The afternoon was over half-spent when the ill-mated couple reached their home. Hector's dull eyes lighted up, for he saw a faint hope of escaping that terrible tongue, for a time at least.

Nancy gave an ominous sniff, as nothing was seen of Minnie.

"It's that pesky Dashin' Ned, I s'pose! No sooner is my back turned then everythin' must give way to loverin' an' sich like nonsense. You Minnie!"

"Tain't the cap'n," ventured Hector. "He's over Broad Prairie way. I hearn it at Austin—"

"Tend to the critters an' let that shet your trap," snapped Nancy. "I hearn somethin' at Austin you won't forgit overly soon!"

Hector meekly obeyed. Nancy entered the house to doff her "best things," but at the first step across the threshold, she paused with an expression of horror. Upon the white, well-scoured floor was a track, the imprint of a long, narrow moccasin in red mud. Robinson Crusoe may have experienced a greater terror at sight of the Track, but he could not have been more thoroughly excited than was our housewife at the desecration of her hearth. She raised her voice and called to Hector, a ringing, ominous summons that he dared not delay in answering, but leaving his mules half-ungedared he shambled into the cabin.

"Blow the horn for Minnie," said Nancy, and there was a strangely subdued cadence to her voice that caused the giant's big eyes to open wide. "Somebody's bin yere, makin' mischief."

While Hector blew blast after blast upon the crooked ox-horn, Nancy pursued her investiga-

tions. She found that their one little hair-bound trunk had been ransacked, and then she felt convinced of the worst. The object she was looking for was gone. There was only one man living who knew its real value; the man, as she now believed, who had left that muddy footprint upon the floor.

"She's gone a-fishin', I reckon," suggested Hector, as half an hour passed without anything being seen or heard of the missing girl. "The line's gone."

"Run up the river to the Big Eddy. 'F she ain't thar, make haste back an' come on down," briefly commanded Nancy.

Hector obeyed with truly wonderful alacrity for one of his sluggish disposition, but his search was vain. He knew, too, that Minnie had not visited the Big Eddy that day, else the moist earth would have betrayed the fact, by containing the imprint of her feet.

As he was returning to the house, he heard the shrill voice of his wife pronouncing his name, in a tone that seemed one of alarm or else great excitement. Only pausing at the wagon to snatch up his rifle, Hector ran swiftly down the river-bank, nor paused until he reached the side of his wife. Her face was white and hardened, and bore an air of almost desperate resolution.

Without a word she pointed to the moist clay at her feet. Hector stooped, his usually dull eyes glaring luridly.

The ground bore unmistakable evidence of a stubborn struggle, in the different footprints that crossed and half obliterated one another. Among them he saw a small, daintily-formed track that spoke only too plainly. He knew that his little Minnie had made it; he knew that she had fought nobly for freedom, if not life; and he knew, too, that her efforts had been in vain. All this the footprints told him.

"Injuns!" he muttered, hoarsely, as he arose. "They've stole away my little gal! but I'll foller 'em—I'll hunt 'em down ef it takes a lifetime!"

"There's more yet," said Nancy, with an awful calmness. "Go down the bank—look under the roots. You'll see thar's more than Injuns in this black work."

Hector obeyed, and paused beside the pile of dirt and roots just where Colonel Overton had brought up in his roll down the bank. In the stiffening mud was the imprint of a human hand as clear and distinct as though taken by a professional modeler. The little finger had been cut off at the middle joint; near its base was the imprint of a broad, plain ring.

As he stared at this tell-tale mark, a dull, grayish shade crept over the settler's face, and there was an expression of abject terror in his eyes as he silently climbed up the bank.

"You see now who did it," uttered Nancy, in a low, stern voice. "I knowed it would be so. Thar ain't one drop o' true blood in his ugly karkidge! He stole the locket an' he's stole the girl. Come! we're losin' time. Git the mules ready. I'd rather the girl was dead then in his hands!"

"He'll murder us—you fergit what he said," muttered the settler, brushing the cold sweat from his brow.

"He's broke his word; we kin break ours. I'm goin' ef I hev to go alone. But if you play the coward now, when she needs your help, you an' me is two from that minnit."

"They's a dozen of 'em—not countin' him. You'll only git massacred. It's pritty nigh dark an' we can't foller the trail."

Nancy clutched at a stout stick, a dangerous fire in her eyes, and Hector, trembling with a strange terror though he was, started on a run for the cabin, closely followed by his better-half.

The sun was setting when she emerged once more from the cabin, bearing a bundle of provisions and an old rifle. A leather belt was around her waist, supporting a knife and a brace of revolvers. She climbed into the ragged saddle, signing to Hector to mount the other mule.

"Strike out fer Broad Prairie, 's straight as you kin!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A FAIR ROAD-AGENT.

"HALT! gentlemen; you are my prisoners. Move one finger toward drawing a weapon, and that will be the end of your earthly troubles!"

The two horsemen—Kirke Howard and Mark Bird, the cousins—mechanically drew rein with simultaneous exclamations of wondering amazement. And well they might. Little suspecting any impending danger, they were riding briskly along, thinking only of the cool shade and repose which awaited them at the thick clump of timber just ahead, to reach which they had left the trail only a few minutes before. But instead of a comfortable rest, a most disagreeable surprise greeted them.

A small, but fiery and beautifully-formed mustang, spotted like a pard, dashed out from the thick undergrowth, and its rider, holding a cocked and leveled revolver in each hand, sharply uttered the threatening challenge. In mute amazement the cousins stared at the road-

agent. Undeniably brave though they were, and possessing the advantage of numbers, neither made any attempt to draw a weapon. Why?

Because the road-agent whose weapons covered their hearts was a woman!

"You appear astonished, gentlemen," and the fair road-agent laughed softly. "You are not accustomed to seeing woman's rights carried to such an extreme. Remember you are in Texas, where all things are possible. But a truce to jesting. You have not answered my challenge. Will you surrender peaceably, or must I persuade you?"

"We would have paid the toll far more willingly had you trusted to your natural weapons," replied Mark, quickly recovering his wonted audacity. "That would be a triumph worthy you and not shaming us. You push one's gallantry hard, when you try to enforce homage at the muzzle of the pistol, lady."

"Bah! do I look like one to beg for what I can command? You think soft words are all that is necessary, because I am a woman. I repeat that you are my prisoners. Will you surrender quietly?"

"Without meaning any offense, madam or miss," interrupted Howard, in a tone of impatience, "we have no time for jesting. Our business is pressing. And so—a fair good-day to you."

"Stop!" sharply cried the woman, and as she spoke one of her revolvers exploded, and Howard's hat flew from his head. "Another movement like that and I will send the mate of that bullet through your brain. Your lives are at my mercy, but I would not have your blood upon my hands, unless you force me. For certain reasons I wish to take you captive; but take you I will, dead or alive!"

"If you were not a woman—!"

"I ask no odds on that score," proudly cried the woman, her eyes flashing. "Man or woman, you could not escape me. Before you could touch a weapon, I could lay you both upon the ground, dead. But you are worth more to us alive. Once more; do you surrender?"

"Not unless we have some guarantee—" began Mark, his easy temper growing ruffled.

"What your future fate will be does not rest with me," coldly interrupted the fair road-agent. "I have only to deal with the present. I volunteered to arrest you, thinking that by so doing I might prevent bloodshed. If I fail in this, blame yourself. I have pledged my word to take you into camp, and true as the sun shines down upon us, I will keep my word. Take your choice—dead or alive?"

With a sharp cry, Howard touched his horse with the spur and dashed toward the woman, drawing a revolver at the same instant. But rapid as were his motions, hers were equally prompt. With an aim as unerring as it was swift, her revolver spoke, and shot through the brain, Howard's horse plunged heavily forward, casting its rider headlong to the ground. Her face lighted with a stern resolution, her eyes glowing vividly, the woman shifted her aim and covered Mark Bird before he could draw a weapon.

"Shall I serve you the same, or are you sensible enough to know when you are worsted? You hesitate! Look then! what chance have you?"

As she spoke, she uttered a sharp whistle. As though by magic, Bird found himself surrounded by nearly a dozen forbidding-looking men who arose from the tall grass and covered him with their pistols. Hot-blooded and even reckless at times, Mark was not foolish enough to throw away his life where there was not even the ghost of a chance for him, and replied, though sullenly:

"It is your turn now. I surrender. Let me look to my friend, then you can dispose of me as you will."

"Give me your weapons, first," uttered the woman, riding close to his side, then speaking in a low, rapid tone: "I was forced to act as I have, as the only means of saving your life. Be guarded, but never despair. I will save you both at the cost of my life, if needs be."

Mark stared at her in astonishment, but the woman snatched the pistols from his hands with a frown, turning and extending the weapons toward a young man who drew near.

"Take them, Martin, as a part reward for permitting me to usurp your place just now. And hold Queen for me, please."

Leaping lightly to the ground she advanced to where Howard lay, still senseless after his severe fall. Mark was at her side in an instant, unheeding the ugly glances with which he was favored from the dark, handsome Martin in particular.

"Your friend is not hurt," said the young woman, after a brief but skillful examination. "Give him a drop of this brandy. And mind," she muttered in his ear as both bent over the insensible man, "my life as well as yours depends upon your prudence now."

Mark turned his head with a glance of understanding, but the young woman had turned aside, and his eyes met the black, snaky orbs of Martin, instead. This encounter lasted but an

instant, but was long enough for Mark to recognize the fact that he had at least one bitter, unscrupulous enemy among the outlaws. There was death plainly written in Martin's eyes.

A few moments later Howard recovered his senses sufficiently to comprehend the disagreeable situation into which himself and cousin had fallen. Surrounded by nearly a score of men whose evil and sin-scarred countenances but too plainly bespoke the foulness of their hearts, it is not to be wondered at that his heart was heavy and full of painful forebodings.

Nor was Mark feeling in much better case. True, he was assured that a friend was nigh, but even if full confidence could be placed in her words, after the part she had so recently played, she was but a feeble woman, after all.

As soon as Howard was able to walk, the party, with the two captives in their midst, entered the little timbered island, pausing beside a small, cool spring.

"Get the ropes, Markle," uttered Martin, nodding toward the spot where a number of horses were tied. "Two of you fellows go strip the horse. Bring the rigging in here."

"Stop, Martin," exclaimed the young woman, as the outlaw, thongs in hand, was about to bind the prisoners. "I took them captive. If they will give their parole of honor not to make any attempt to escape—"

"I will promise nothing," doggedly interrupted Kirke. "I have been treated like a dog, and I swear to have a deep and bitter revenge."

"Pledge or no pledge, I am not going to run any risk," growled Martin. "I gave you your way in the other matter, Belle, but I will not risk the captain's displeasure, even for your honeyed smiles. If you are wise, you will be studying up some excuse for interfering in what he intended to keep secret."

The cousins were bound, hand and foot, then after allowing their horses to feed for an hour longer, the outlaws made preparations to take the road. While they were thus occupied, the eyes of Mark Bird were not idle. Not only did he register the faces of each and all of the outlaws in his memory, but he found time to closely scrutinize the young woman who had played so prominent a part in their capture.

She stood leaning against a tree, not far distant, and formed a picture that few eyes could have dwelt upon without interest. But little if any above the medium height of her sex, she looked every inch a princess of the prairie in her half-savage garb. Her dark and curling hair fell to her shoulders in glossy masses. Her eyes were large and filled with a liquid fire that matched well her rich, clear complexion and clear-cut features.

A striking type of the purest brunette; all is said in that word. Although she yet lacked several years of being out of her teens, her form, nourished by a wild, free and out-door life, was superbly developed. Her dress was composed in part of a plumed turban, a close-fitting jacket of scarlet cloth, a short tunic and full trousers, gathered just below the knee; silken stockings and beaded moccasins. Across her shoulders was suspended a short rifle. A knife and revolvers were at her girdle.

With both prisoners securely bound upon the same horse, the outlaws, first assuring themselves that the coast was clear, rode forth from the timber island. But ere they had covered a hundred yards, the leaders halted with a cry of wondering alarm.

A horseman confronted them as suddenly as though he had risen from the bowels of the earth. Both horse and rider were black as midnight from head to heel. Both were of more than common size.

A hoarse, taunting laugh came to the ears of the outlaws. The strange rider flung forward a long, heavy rifle, firing without any apparent attempt to catch an aim. Yet at the report a man fell dead, pierced through the brain.

"DOUBLE SIGHT, THE DEATH SHOT!" screamed Martin, wildly.

CHAPTER IX.

A PAIR OF LAMBS.

As Mrs. Nancy Lamb ordered her husband into the saddle, her black-snake whip cut the air with a significant whistle that Hector only too well knew how to interpret, and catching up a loose bundle in a coarse sack, he obeyed. Nancy glared at him sternly as she recognized his fiddle, but said nothing. She was shrewd enough to know that there might be danger to her authority in pushing it too far.

"Now tell me just what you hear about Dashin' Ned an' the Broad Prairie," she commanded, when the narrow bottom-like valley was left far behind them and their trail led over the level plain.

Hector obeyed, but he was in such a state of discomposure that it will save time to condense his report.

For several years the counties of Guadalupe, Comal and Hays had been the tramping-ground of a strong and well-organized band of horse-thieves and highwaymen. So bold and troublesome had they become that Edward Conway, then sheriff of Comal, organized a company of Rangers for the express purpose of exterminating the audacious gang. But for months

labors were in vain, although he had several trusty and skillful scouts and spies out day and night. However carefully his plans might be laid, the enemy was sure to get wind of his movements in ample time to foil or evade them. Dashing Ned, as the young sheriff was known far and wide, suspected that there was some treachery at work, but was unable to detect the traitor. As already recorded, he had gained information that enabled him to foil the intended attack upon the bank at San Antonio, but his informant could not or would not point out to him any of the conspirators. Immediately after the event, Dashing Ned received word that the outlaws had a rendezvous in one of the dense clumps of chaparral that dotted over Broad Prairie, and at once took his men in that direction. Though moving with all possible secrecy, the news got wind, and was a common topic in Austin, hence Hector Lamb's knowledge.

"We must find him," said Nancy, resolutely. "He's so sweet on Minnie that he'll drop everything else, an' never give over until he's found her an' paid off the Injun dog that stole her away."

"Twon't never be. He's a devil. They cain't nobody nor nothin' hurt him," muttered Hector, with a nervous start as a jack-rabbit leaped from a clump of grass beneath the feet of his mule. "Le's turn back, Nancy! Mebbe he won't hurt the gal—"

"You say one word more o' that, an' I'll lar-rup you till you cain't stan'!" cried the woman, fiercely. "You call him a devil, an' yit you're ready to sneak away an' let him work his dirty will on the pore child we've raised from a baby like she was our own flesh an' blood. Hector Lamb, I always knowed you was a fool, but I didn't think you was sech a pore, shiftless coward afore!"

"It's only him," muttered the settler. "I ain't a coward to any one else. But when he looks at me I kin feel the rope 'round my neck, chokin'—chokin'—"

"The more fool you!" snapped Nancy. "You know 'twas a lie. They couldn't 'a' hurt us much for what we did that night. An' we was starvin'. I wish we'd 'a' defied him then, an' dared his wu'st. But like fools we let him skeer us in to doin' what he wanted. But now: s'pose he was to sw'ar it onto us? Who'd you s'pose would b'lieve him, a'ter so long a time? They'd be more likely to hang him fer keepin' still so many years. No, old man; the time's come fer us to stick up fer our own rights, an' when I see Dashin' Ned, I'm goin' to tell him the hull story. Ef he is in love with Minnie, he'll see that she an' us two has justice."

Without pausing for rest the two Lambs rode on through the night, for the most part in silence. It is strange, but true, that Mrs. Nancy never doubted their finding Dashing Ned, though Broad Prairie, with its numerous timber islands and dense patches of chaparral could easily afford cover for a dozen regiments.

With an hour's halt to rest the mules and allow them an opportunity to graze, the adventurers pressed on without any incident of moment breaking the monotony of their ride, until an hour past noon. Then, just as they were rounding a long point of stunted trees and thorn-bushes, they met a horseman, face to face.

Hector took one hasty glance, then rolled rather than dismounted from his mule, and with a ludicrous bellow of abject terror, plunged into the matted undergrowth with an impetuosity that left only his legs and hind-quarters in sight. And there he lay, unable to crawl further in, but so frightened that he probably was unaware how much he was exposed.

Very different was the conduct of his wife, though she, too, was startled and even alarmed. Quickly raising the old rusty rifle that had balanced across her lap, she vigorously pulled the trigger. Had she not forgotten to cock her weapon, there would have been an empty saddle before her, beyond a doubt. As it was, this little oversight gave her time to realize the mistake both she and her husband had fallen into, to see that the strange rider was not their bitter enemy, though bearing a strong resemblance to him, at least outwardly.

"What on earth do you mean, woman?" he cried, more in astonishment than alarm. "Are you crazy that you try to murder me?"

"Thank the Lord the pesky thing wouldn't go off!" gasped Nancy, dropping the rifle and covering her face with her hands, for there was a true, womanly heart beneath that rough exterior.

"What does it all mean, anyhow?" he persisted.

"We tuck you fer another man," and Nancy regained her wonted assurance with a powerful effort. "You look more like him than he does hisself! Mebbe you're his brother?"

"I have no brother," smiled the stranger. "May I ask who it is that I resemble so wonderfully?"

"Folks call him Kernel Overton, but he's a Injun half-breed. He stole away our da'ter, an' we was huntin' him. That's why I tried to shoot you, stranger."

"And that is your husband, I suppose?"

"I'm most ashamed to say it, but he is my old man. You, Hector! come out o' that bresh!"

There was a spasmodic movement of Hector's legs as though he was trying to squeeze still further into the brush, but no other sign was given to show that he heard the summons.

"Hold my critter a minnit, stranger," muttered Nancy, an ominous light in her eyes.

Slipping to the ground, she flung the rope reins to the amused stranger, and black-snake in hand stole on tip-toe to where Hector was in hiding. Drawing the lash through her fingers, and measuring her distance, Nancy threw all her skill and power into the effort. The whip cracked like a pistol, and a howl of agony that arose from the brush told how true was her aim. A dozen blows followed in swift succession, each one bringing a puff of dust from the broad buckskin patch which ornamented the seat of Hector's trowsers, until, unable longer to bear the pain, he backed out of the brush, scratched and bleeding, a doleful-looking object.

"Mebbe you'll know better then to mistake a gentleman for a ornery half-an'-half, next time," panted Nancy, forgetting her own nearly fatal mistake.

When satisfied that the horseman was not the dreaded Overton, Hector slunk sheepishly aside, leaving Nancy to conduct the affair to her own liking. This she did to admiration, for by close questioning she not only learned that Dashing Ned was in Broad Prairie, but received clear directions as to the precise point where he would in all probability pass the night. This anxiety satisfied, her natural curiosity began to awake, and her questions took a more personal turn. The stranger, however, seemed inclined to be reticent as to his own affairs, and with a brief nod, he gave his animal free rein and rode rapidly away.

It may be as well to draw a veil over the next hour or two. There are few of us who like to read of the tortures of the damned.

The day wore on, and the pair of ill-mated Lambs pursued their course as directed by the stranger. It was just sunset when they came in view of the timber island—conspicuous for many miles around, from two dead trees which towered high above the surrounding verdure—where they had been directed to look for Dashing Ned and his men. The jaded mules were urged on, but it was inky dark before the edge of the timber could be reached. Dismounting and hitching their animals, the Lambs entered the wood, using all caution, for enemies were far more likely to be encountered in Broad Prairie than friends. Through the dense foliage they presently caught the glimmering light of a camp-fire, and carefully stole forward. A few minutes later they found themselves upon the edge of the glade in which stood the dead trees. A weird, impressive scene met their eyes.

From one of the dead limbs hung a rope. Beneath the rope was a horse and rider. The latter's hands were bound behind his back, and the rope was noosed around his throat. A number of men were grouped around, with drawn pistols and bared knives.

Was it murder, or was it retribution?

At that instant, one of the mules, probably scenting the horses in the glade, uplifted its voice in a mighty bray. The alarm was given. With loud cries and curses the men dashed forward. The Lambs shrunk back, as a blinding flash filled their eyes and a rifle exploded almost in their faces!

CHAPTER X.

BORDER LAW.

WITHIN a certain portion of Broad Prairie a curious drama is being enacted. Near the center of a circle, the diameter of which is nearly two-score miles, is a single horseman. The ground is level and even as the top of a billiard-table. Not a bush nor a tree breaks the dull monotony of the tall, sun-burned grass that lazily undulates before the gentle morning breeze. Afar off—appearing at the very horizon, is a faint, low line of something dark. In which-ever direction the rider's eyes may turn, this artificial horizon meets the sky-line. The round prairie is inclosed upon every side by a dense, almost impenetrable girdle of chaparral.

The horseman seems uneasy. He rises in his stirrups and gazes long and steadily behind him. His brow lowers and a deep, bitter curse hisses through his tightly-clenched teeth. But the wild look deepens in his eyes, and a grayish shade creeps over his bronzed face.

Nearly a mile distant a tall man sits upon a dark horse, motionless as a statue. Only one man, yet the horseman in the center of the prairie regards him with steadily increasing dread—almost horror. Since early dawn that black shadow has hung upon his track, following and even imitating his every motion; advancing, retreating, and halting. What can it mean?

"I'll find out—man or devil, I won't stan' this no longer!" mutters the horseman, and he carefully examines his pistols to make sure that they will not fail him in case of need.

With stern resolve he rides toward the mysterious being who has so persistently shadowed him. As though moved by the same impulse, the object of his wondering dread wheels his

animal and rides away. The pursuer urges his horse onward at top speed. The fugitive darts ahead, just maintaining his distance, no more, no less. The pursuer draws rein, abruptly checking his horse. The fugitive does the same, at the same instant; yet his face is turned to the front and away from the other rider. The first horseman wheels abruptly and resumes his original course. He glances over his shoulder, and the gray shade grows more ghastly. The black horse and rider are once more dogging him!

At this, abject terror seems to overpower the man's iron nerves. He urges his steed on with voice and spur, endeavoring to run away from the haunting shadow. But in vain. As though connected by some subtle yet irresistible bond, the relative distance between himself and the black rider is steadily maintained.

The haunted man has one hope remaining. He will seek refuge among the trees. Once under cover of the chaparral, he will force the matter to a conclusion.

Straight on he rides until the timber ahead grows clear and distinct. He glances back. The shadow is still upon his track, no nearer, no further than before.

"Good! no horse that was ever foaled kin ketch me now, afore I kin make the timber," he mutters; but ends with a low, gasping cry as he draws rein with such force that the haunches of his horse touch the ground.

A second horseman, the counterpart of the first, now confronts him. His danger is doubled. The actions of the two riders are identical. They are acting in concert.

The hunted man is losing his head. He turns to the left and urges his panting animal forward. A swift, double glance tells him the sickening truth. The two strange riders are dashing along in a line with him. And more. He can see that they are slowly, surely edging toward him!

He lashes his horse. A mad superstition is turning his brain. The manifold crimes of his checkered life are rising before him. He sees a ghastly, menacing spirit, enwrapped in a bloody shroud, threatening him with its fleshless hand. And behind it another—and another!

The phantoms fade away; yet there is a human shape before him. He is confronted by a third horseman.

He wrenches in his steed. The over-ridden animal staggers and falls. The haunted man staggers to his feet. He draws a pistol; but a bloody film obscures his vision. He brushes a hand across his eyes—then, reeling, he falls.

And the three horsemen gallop up to his side.

"You stand before us, James Brown, charged with murder, with being a traitor and a spy. You shall have a fair trial. If you can refute these charges, you shall go free and unharmed. If not—by the heavens above us! you shall die the death of a dog!"

Dashing Ned confronted the prisoner with a stern frown. The crackling fire cast a lurid glare over the impressive scene. Two-score men were grouped around the two blasted trees that stood in the center of the little glade.

"The charge is a lie," responded the prisoner in a husky voice, as he moistened his dry and cracked lips with his tongue. "These fellers hate me. They'd sw'ar to anything so they could put me out o' the way. You hain't got no right to try me. Ef you think I've done anything 'as deserves it, take me to town an' give me a chance fer my life. Don't murder me!"

"You entered our league with a perfect understanding of our rules and regulations. You solemnly swore to abide by our laws. You are charged with treachery. You are said to have joined us in order to betray our plans to Equality Eph and his band of chaparral wolves. We all know that some one has been playing the traitor. You were suspected, watched, and caught in the act. You were seen to meet seven men last night. A portion of your words were overheard; enough to convict you. In return you received orders to report at the 'upper station.' Your every step was dogged after that. To make sure, those watching you bided their time. You rode away from our camp, no doubt to carry out your orders. You were followed, and by playing upon your superstitious fears, you were driven into a trap. You were captured and brought here for trial. You shall have every chance to defend yourself. Six of these men will act as a jury. You can select them yourself, or we will draw lots. Take your choice."

"You an' them both have made up your minds to murder me," was the sullen reply. "You're forty to one. It'd be a fool job to fight ag'inst sech odds. You kin work your own way. I won't help twist the rope fer my own neck."

Without replying, Dashing Ned tore a leaf from his note-book, and cutting it into as many strips as there were men in his command, numbered the bits from one up. These he placed in his hat and shook them well together. Then standing in front of the prisoner, that he might see everything was conducted fairly, he said:

"Form in line, men, and advance one at a time. Those who draw the six lowest numbers will serve as the jury. They will listen care-

fully to the evidence, and decide whether the accused is guilty or innocent."

The drawing was carried out, and the six men took the position pointed out by their chief. The first witness was called, and gave in his evidence. When he was through, Dashing Ned said:

"Ask him what questions you like, prisoner. He is bound to answer them all, and swear to his truth in replying."

But Brown remained silent. He had evidently made up his mind to bear the worst, and would not protract the torture by vain struggles. He had played a bold game—played it well; he had lost, and he knew that he must pay the forfeit of his failure.

The array of proof was indeed fearfully strong and convincing. From the first the prisoner had played a double role. Through his cunning and cool courage Equality Eph had gained the knowledge that enabled him to so long and successfully elude the search and foil the carefully laid plans of the Rangers.

This alone would have been sufficient to doom the prisoner to death under the stringent rules which governed the Rangers, but there was more to come.

One of the men who had been set to watch Brown had suddenly disappeared. After a long search he was found wounded to death. He lived long enough to charge Brown with his murder. Discovering himself followed, Brown had ambuscaded the scout, shot and then stabbed him, leaving him for dead. Then he hastened to keep his appointment with the outlaws, where he was followed, overheard and finally captured.

"You have heard the evidence, gentlemen of the jury," cried Dashing Ned, coldly, after Brown had stubbornly refused to cross-examine the last witness. "It remains with you to decide whether the prisoner be innocent or guilty."

Without a moment's hesitation the six men arose and in one breath announced their verdict. Guilty.

"James Brown," said Dashing Ned, solemnly, "you have heard the verdict. Have you anything to say why the sentence of death should not be pronounced upon you?"

"What use? you're bound to murder me, anyhow. Go on with your rat-killin'!" snarled the doomed man.

"You are sentenced to be hung, then. Fix the rope, boys."

A couple of lassoes were knotted together and one end flung over a stout branch. A noose was made in the other end, while a horse was brought beneath the rope. The prisoner was lifted into the saddle, his arms still bound. The noose was placed around his neck. The rope was drawn taut and the loose end securely tied around the trunk of the tree. This done, at a motion from Dashing Ned, the men drew aside.

"James Brown, you are granted two minutes in which to say your prayers. At the end of that time you die."

Watch in hand Dashing Ned audibly counted the seconds. Only this sound broke the otherwise impressive silence, until—the voice of a mule was heard, braying lustily.

And a death-shot was discharged from the darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

WOLVES OF THE CHAPARRAL.

As their comrade fell before that unerring rifle; as Martin uttered that fear-inspiring name; as they beheld the man or demon concerning whom so many wild and thrilling tales were told, the outlaws shrunk back as from the plague, and some among their number seemed about to seek safety in headlong flight.

With a cry of mortified rage the young woman, Missouri Belle, spurred her pony forward, her eyes flashing fire.

"Twenty men cowed by a single man—and he with the life-blood of your comrade staining his hand! Go! hide your heads, you pitiful cowards! I will avenge poor Conrade myself!"

Straight toward the black rider the excited girl rode, and as the spotted pony carried her within pistol range, she drew a revolver and fired shot after shot in swift succession.

Mark Bird, bound and disarmed though he was, urged forward the horse which he bestrode behind his cousin, not thinking of the danger he was courting, only seeing the fair young girl rushing to such an unequal encounter, deserted by those whose duty it was to guard and defend her.

The black rider remained motionless, his eyes riveted upon the form of Missouri Belle as she charged down upon him, a glorious vision. Motionless until the leaden bullets began whistling viciously around him, and it seemed as though the fair road-agent was fated to avenge the death of her follower. But then, without a word or gesture, the Death Shot wheeled his horse and sped away over the level plain.

This seemed to restore in a degree the usual courage of the outlaws, and with Martin at their head, they put their animals to speed and thundered along the triple trail.

Belle urged her pony on with voice and spur, but all her efforts were in vain. The black horse forged ahead until its rider was beyond

pistol range, then steadily maintained its advantage without seeming effort, though the spotted mustang was straining every nerve to its utmost tension.

For over a mile the chase swept on. Martin and his comrades had overtaken the doubly-burdened horse ridden by the cousins. Missouri Belle, at length satisfied that it was beyond the powers of her pony to overtake the black rider, relaxed her exertions and rejoined the outlaws.

"Is there no horse here that can come up with that demon? I will give one hundred dollars to the man that takes him, dead or alive!"

"As well chase the wind!" muttered Martin, sullenly. "That is no mortal man and horse. A bullet flattens against his breast and a knife shivers like a bit of glass. He is a demon—he and his horse! He is just playing with us. Or trying to lead us into some trap or pitfall. I will face flesh and blood long as any man, but I'll not fight against spirits."

"And you are the one my father has chosen to succeed him—a coward, doubly dyed!" flashed Missouri Belle. "Not a word! the sight of your craven face is enough, without the idle buzzing of your tongue. Forward, men! Remember poor Conrade!"

A wild cheer greeted this fiery speech, and the chase swept on through the high grass with redoubled vigor and determination. Not the least interested were the cousins. Eagerly they watched the fugitive. Though the outlaws were urging their horses on with bloody spur, the black steed was holding his own, and was simply pacing.

"What did I say?" suddenly cried Martin.

"Is that a mortal horse?"

The Death Shot turned in his saddle and waved one hand in mocking defiance. The black horse shot forward like an arrow fresh from the bow, running low, smooth and with marvelous swiftness, leaving the outlaws so rapidly that by contrast their animals appeared to be creeping.

On like a swallow the black horse sped; and then vanished as though the earth had suddenly opened and swallowed him up!

Uneasy glances passed between the outlaws. Superstitious as most evil beings are, bronzed faces grew pale and voices trembled. Even Missouri Belle did not entirely escape, but her voice was steady and determined:

"There is some trick in this. I am going to solve the mystery. Those who are afraid can await my return."

"Look yonder!" and a gray-bearded outlaw pointed straight ahead, far beyond the point where the Death Shot had so suddenly disappeared. "Horsemen, and coming this way. It may be the Rangers!"

Missouri Belle drew rein and producing a small but powerful field-glass from her pocket, carefully scanned the distant group.

"They are Indians," she said, finally, restoring the glass. "I cannot make out their number, but it is not greater than our own."

"You called me a craven, Miss Arkwright," cried Martin. "I will show you how well I deserve the name. They, at least, are flesh and blood. I followed before, now I will lead!"

Side by side he and Missouri Belle raced, closely followed by the others who, now that they were about to deal with an enemy whom they could understand, seemed to forget their fears and superstitions.

"A nice fix we're in to be fighting Indians!" said Mark to Kirke, in a tone of utter disgust. "Can't you manage to pull the cursed brute up?"

"No. We can roll off, if things get too badly mixed up. Better a broken neck than be spit-tered on one of those lances."

The Indians were apparently nothing loth, and the two parties swiftly neared each other until, when less than half a mile separated them, the old robber cried out:

"They're Lipans—I can see old Grizzly Paw!"

The Indians appeared to make a somewhat similar discovery at nearly the same instant, for, coming to a halt, one of their number raised his buffalo-robe high in the air, as a signal of peace. Missouri Belle and Martin also drew rein, but from a very different cause. At their feet lay a narrow but deep crevasse or barranca.

"Look!" and the girl's voice rung with scorn as she pointed to the bottom of the ravine, where the sandy soil was deeply scored with hoof-prints. "There is your mystery—there is where your phantom horse leaped down! A very substantial trail for a spirit to leave behind!"

Raising her voice she hailed the Lipan chief, and as he approached, she gave a brief detail of what had occurred.

"Let half a dozen of your braves join as many of my men and follow the trail. The rest will ride along the edge. Capture the assassin alive, if possible; but dead or alive he must not escape."

This plan was quickly carried out. The trail was followed down the barranca, which deepened and grew wider as the men advanced. The nature of the bottom altered, as well, growing hard and flinty, covered with gravel and stones, among which the trail was soon lost.

Nor could the closest search discover any further trace of the mysterious rider or his horse. Grizzly Paw himself descended and sought long and closely, only to confess himself baffled at length.

Martin smiled grimly as Missouri Belle gave the word to retrace their steps, but he said nothing; and he was wise. The fair road-agent was not in the most propitious humor.

Passing around the head of the barranca, the united forces rode on their way. Martin and Grizzly Paw, riding a little apart, were conversing eagerly, and when they came abreast of a small timber *motte*, the young outlaw accompanied the Lipans to their encampment.

Half an hour later he overtook the party, and riding beside Missouri Belle, he made some communication that appeared to excite her not a little. Mark Bird, ever on the alert, caught something about a captive—"a girl—a companion for you—along soon." He listened eagerly, but could hear nothing further than these disjointed words.

The sun had disappeared nearly an hour when the party left the prairie and entered a dense chaparral, following a narrow, winding trail, in single file, for what seemed to the weary captives an interminable distance. Finally they emerged into a spacious clearing or glade, thickly dotted with little patches of trees and shrubbery. Near the center of this opening several small fires gleamed brightly, and by their rays the prisoners could make out a number of small, rude brush huts.

Martin grasped the bridle of the horse they rode, and led him through the cluster of huts, pausing before a building considerably larger and neater than the rest. Leaving them for a moment he entered the door, then returned and cutting the thongs at their ankles, bade them dismount and follow him. With some difficulty they obeyed, and entering the building, found themselves in a square, fairly illuminated room.

A tall, stout-built man lay upon a pile of robes and blankets. At a nod from him, Martin held the rude oil-lamp down to the faces of first one and then the other of the cousins.

"That will do," growled the invalid, with a curse. "You have made no mistake. But to make sure—your names?"

Realizing the utter folly of obstinacy, the cousins replied.

"Good enough! You came to Texas in answer to a letter from one David Woodson?"

"You will excuse our answering that question until we are better convinced of your right to ask it," coldly replied Kirke.

"The right of might, young man. You are in my power—I can do with you as I will. One word from my lips will condemn you to death or give you life. If you are wise you will remember this. But I don't mind answering you. I am David Woodson. There! I am not well enough to say more. Martin, put them in the cage, and leave their hands bound. Set a close guard over them. Go, now!"

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

THE instructions of the outlaw chief were promptly and thoroughly carried out by Martin and his fellows. The two prisoners were led through the little collection of huts and thrust into an oblong structure of logs. The door was closed and barred upon them, and as they stood in the utter darkness, the cousins could distinctly hear Martin giving the man placed upon guard his orders.

"Allow no one to approach the jug without the pass-word, and if either of the prisoners attempts to escape, shoot him down—and don't waste your bullet, either!"

"Prime comfort, that!" uttered Mark, with a faint laugh. "Seems to me we're seeing the elephant in sober earnest, Kirke. I don't want you to think I am weakening, but I'd give all my old boots for just one glimpse of the old home and folks about this time. But honestly, I believe we've been on a wild-goose chase from the first."

"Not altogether," replied Howard, earnestly. "He may be dead, but he did not die on that night. Remember what we found in the grave. We know that his teeth were double all around, in front as well as on the side; the skull we found was not thus furnished."

"Well, I hope you're right. But about this fellow; do you believe he is the David Woodson who wrote that letter?"

"He may have written the letters, but I am pretty well convinced that the real David Woodson is dead and buried. Five different men told me the same story about his accident and the manner in which his skull was mended; and I proved the truth of their statement. As for this man—this captain of outlaws—I do not know what to think. He puzzles me."

"Don't try to think, then. Take it easy, like me. The solution will come soon enough. I only wish I could be as sure about my trouble. Where have I met that little spitfire on the painted mustang? Somewhere, some time, I am almost sure. That face and figure are a combination one could not easily forget. And yet, I can't place her, to save me!"

"Do you know what I have been thinking?"

slowly responded Howard. "I believe this girl is the woman you met that evening at the Golden Harvest. I watched her closely, that night, and I do not believe I can be mistaken."

Mark was completely taken by surprise, but gradually the truth seemed to dawn upon his mind, and ere long he felt morally certain that the pink domino and the girl road-agent were indeed one and the same person.

For nearly an hour longer the cousins crouched down together in one corner of the square room, discussing their peculiar situation. From their first setting foot upon Texan soil, an atmosphere of peculiar mystery had seemed to envelop them. Their search had been one constant succession of surprises, and though they had learned much that was new and startling to them, they seemed no nearer the desired end than at first, before the letter of David Woodson fell among them like a bomb-shell and scattered its marvelous tidings through the family ranks.

"Hist!" softly muttered Mark, nudging his cousin.

Somewhere from out the darkness came the low, subdued sound of sobbing. With heightened curiosity the cousins listened, and finally locating the sound, or rather the direction from whence it proceeded, they noiselessly stole along the side of the room and paused at the southern end.

The sobbing grew fainter, then died away. A few moments later a low, troubled voice was heard, raised in prayer. The cousins listened with bated breath. They knew now that they were listening to a woman or girl. She was praying for help from on High to strengthen her in the trial to come, for protection against some dreaded persecutor. There were no names mentioned, no clew given by which the cousins could guess her story or condition, other than that she was a captive like themselves.

"But I'm going to find out," muttered Mark, as the gentle voice died away. "These logs don't touch; I can pull out some of the chinking, I guess."

Howard made no reply. Of a far less mercurial disposition than Mark, he had a heart only for the one sacred duty to which he had so solemnly dedicated his life. At least, so he believed, then. The day was not far distant when his eyes were to be opened.

Pressing his back close to the wall, Mark found that he could work his fingers quite adroitly, and with dogged persistence he dug at the hard clay "daubing" until he succeeded in loosening several small bits. Pausing for rest, he turned around, and was greatly surprised to see that his work was done! A slender ray of light was streaming through the aperture, and stooping, Mark peered through. The next instant he started back with a low exclamation of wonder. At this, Kirke Howard came forward. Though no sound escaped his lips, his surprise was no less great than Mark's.

He was peering into a room the counterpart of the one he occupied, save that a rude lamp of oil was suspended from the ceiling. At the further end of the room a young woman was kneeling, her hands clasped, her face white as death, a wild, affrighted look in her dilated eyes. She seemed to be looking him full in the eyes, and Howard drew back with an instinctive delicacy, though reason told him that he was invisible to her. But in that brief glance he recognized the young woman to whom he had been introduced on the day of the feast at San Antonio—Minnie Lamb!

Before he could take a second look, Mark crowded him aside and placing his lips to the aperture, uttered the girl's name.

There was no reply. Minnie had heard the cautious scratching, gnawing sound at the wall, and locating the sound, she had caught a glimpse of a human hand as the mud chinking was removed. She knew that she was in the power of lawless, crime-hardened men; what more natural than that she should suspect some evil deed was impending? A sickening terror held her speechless.

Mark took another look, and readily divined the cause of her silence. He spoke again, louder and clearer:

"We are friends, Miss Minnie. You remember, we took lunch with you at San Antonio; Kirke Howard and Mark Bird. I just wanted to know if there was anything we could do—"

"Take me away from here—for the love of God! gentlemen, take me back home!" sobbed the girl, raising her clasped hands.

"If we only could! But we are prisoners, tied up like dogs!" groaned Mark. "You do the talking, Kirke; I can't stand that!"

"Mark says true, Miss Lamb. We are prisoners and utterly unable to aid you, dearly as we would like. But surely you are in no such danger. Lawless as these men are, they could not wantonly injure you."

"You little know the monster who sent me here, or the man who keeps me captive," responded Minnie, choking down her emotion with an effort. "I am threatened with worse than death unless I can escape—"

At this moment the doors of both rooms were flung violently open, and before the cousins could rise to their feet, they were seized, drag-

ged across the room and there flung upon their backs. A rude gag was thrust into the mouth of each; then a stout, raw-hide rope was placed across their throats, both ends being secured to stout stakes in the earthen floor. Another rope held their lower limbs in like durance.

All this was done without a word being spoken by the outlaws, and, after holding his lantern close to the fastenings and testing them, Martin motioned his men away and followed them from the room, closing and securing the door as before.

The cousins had plenty of time in which to curse their imprudence, for there was little room for doubting the cause of this harsh treatment. The sentries must have overheard them communicating with the girl captive, and, reporting the fact, the outlaws took this method of preventing a repetition of the offense.

By twisting his head as far the rope would permit, Mark could tell that the light had vanished from the adjoining room, or else the chink had been thoroughly stopped up once more. There was no sound from that direction. Nothing could be heard but the faint, shuffling tread of the guard as he slowly paced to and fro before the door.

Despite their confined and painful position and natural anxiety as to what the morrow might bring forth, fatigue caused the prisoners to drop asleep, finally.

How long he slept Mark Bird never knew; but all at once he found himself awake, with every nerve upon the alert, and a profuse perspiration springing from every pore.

The rope across his throat seemed to have grown shorter, for he could not move his head an inch. The darkness was as intense as ever, but his ears did double service instead.

He heard the heavy puncheon door slowly and cautiously swing open, and he knew that some person was standing upon the threshold, peering toward the spot where he lay. It seemed as though the form and features were distinctly visible before his straining eyeballs. The figure of Martin, the outlaw; that dark, handsome face, looking even more than customarily like the prince of evil, as he clutched a long, gleaming knife to his breast.

He felt, rather than heard, the midnight interloper draw nearer foot by foot. More, he could now distinguish two footfalls. They drew closer, finally pausing close beside the slumbering Howard. A brief pause. Then a faint, scuffling sound. A sharp knee struck against his ribs. He knew that a man was kneeling upon Howard's breast! He strove to cry aloud. He exerted his utmost strength in a vain effort to burst his bonds and free himself to aid his loved cousin. He strained until it seemed as though his brain would burst. But all in vain. Martin had done his work too thoroughly. And Mark, weak as an infant from his deadly struggle, his brain reeling, lay half senseless.

The nocturnal visitor passed over the body of Howard and settled down upon that of his cousin. One hand clutched Mark's throat with a suffocating pressure. The other hand fumbled at his breast, tearing open his clothes. And then—Mark knew no more for hours. When he awoke to consciousness, daylight was sifting in through the bark roof. He listened; but no sound of breath came from the lungs of Kirke Howard.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PECULIAR BARGAIN.

It will be remembered that Colonel Overton was left in a precarious situation, some chapters back. His plunge into the water was so sudden and unexpected that the shock confused him not a little. Instinctively he struck out for the fallen tree the instant his head rose above the surface, nor, though the current was swift and powerful, did he experience much difficulty in regaining the partially-submerged log. But he had driven the young woman to desperation, and shifting her grasp upon the fishing-pole, Minnie Lamb discharged a blow at the half-breed's head, throwing all her strength into the effort. Without a sound, Overton relaxed his grasp and sunk beneath the surface, knocked senseless. Fortunately for him there was aid close at hand, else his wild career would have ended then and there; and border history would have lost one of its wildest, most thrilling pages. But of that hereafter.

One brawny savage secured Minnie as she leaped to shore, holding her helpless, one broad palm pressing upon her lips and checking the shriek she strove to utter, while a second and third promptly sprung into the water to rescue their leader. Their efforts were successful, though it was several minutes after he was dragged ashore ere Overton recovered his consciousness. Then he burst into a storm of cursing so furious that the red-men shrunk back fairly appalled, used as they were to wild and tempestuous scenes.

In the midst of his blasphemy, Colonel Overton caught sight of the pale face of the captive maiden, and a marvelously sudden change came over him. All traces of anger vanished and his voice was low and even as he arose and addressed Minnie Lamb:

"I am overjoyed to find that you have concluded not to desert us entirely, dear Minnie. I can't say that I appreciate your style of saying good-by, though," and his white, pointed teeth glistened wolfishly as he tenderly rubbed the rapidly-swelling lump upon his forehead. "You are too enthusiastic by half."

"I wish that pole had been a fence-rail and my arm as strong as my heart was willing!" retorted Minnie, his evil glance rousing a spirit of resistance in her breast.

"If wishes were horses! but they are not—unfortunately for you," laughed Overton, as he turned aside and faced a tall, finely-formed Indian who had taken no part in the recent events, standing coldly aloof. "I have kept you waiting longer than I intended, chief," he said, speaking rapidly. "I hoped to induce the squaw to go with you quietly, but it don't matter much now. You know what you are to do?"

"Git heap whisky—you bet!" grunted the savage, and a swift glitter in his eyes told how dear to his heart was the white man's fire-water.

"Exactly—after you hand this squaw safely over to the Wolf of the Chaparral. You will take her there; give the Wolf this talking paper; and then drink yourself blind drunk as soon as you please. But remember; no squaw, no fire-water. If you lose her you can whistle for your pay."

"Den Turn-over he whis'le fo' he scalp. No squaw—no fire-water—no scalp. Dat make um even."

"My hands can guard my scalp, Grizzly Paw. When black blood runs between us, chief, there will be black faces in the lodges of the Lipans. I am asking no favor of you. I hire you to do me a service, and I agree to pay your own price. If you are not satisfied, say so. You can go your way and I will go mine. Is that plain enough talk?"

"Me take squaw to Wolf, git whisky—den me talk," the Lipan chief responded, with a half-concealed menace in his voice.

Overton cared little for that. He carried his life in his hand, and had for many a year. One enemy more or less gave him small concern. His present engagement faithfully carried out, Grizzly Paw might go hang.

"One word with you, my dear," Overton said to Minnie. "You are angry with me just now, nor do I blame you. But one of these days you will understand me better. Meanwhile you are as safe as though you were still a baby and in your mother's arms. These red gentlemen will treat you respectfully, and so will the person to whom they are about to conduct you. I will see you again in a day or so, and then explain all that may appear strange to you just at present. Keep a good heart, and believe that all will be well. Good-by, now, for the present. Skin out, chief. The sooner you perform your task, the sooner you will corral that whisky!"

Without a word Grizzly Paw strode away to the spot where his horses and main force of warriors were stationed, and mounting Minnie upon a led horse, the Lipans rode swiftly away.

Overton watched them until they were lost to sight, then mounted his own horse, rode back past the deserted cabin, crossed the river at the ford and giving his animal a touch of the spur, galloped swiftly up the narrow, winding valley.

The sun was half-way down the western sky when Colonel Overton entered the rude collection of buildings known as San Marcos. His plans seemed well settled, for he drew rein before a long, low adobe building, resigning his jaded horse to the mercies of a dirty, ragged Mexican boy, then entered the hotel—for such the building was, as evidenced by the effigy of a staring, sun-cracked saint above the narrow door. He was met by a short, fat, smoked-bacon-hued landlord, who bowed and scraped with disgusting sycophancy.

"Drop that, Juan Tierra," said Overton, sharply. "You have two travelers here—Americans, man and wife?"

The landlord bowed, silently.

"They are old; call themselves Marvin?"

Again a silent bow.

"Good enough! go tell them—stay! Show them into the most private room you have, then come and take me to them. But mind, Juan-of-the-broken-knife! my business with those people is private. If any of your spies come sneaking around to eavesdrop, I'll pin their ears to the wall, and tell those at Galveston where they can find the rest of that broken blade. You understand?"

The landlord cast an anxious glance around and bowed again. He could not speak; his limbs trembled violently as he staggered from the room.

Smiling grimly, Colonel Overton waited. The landlord returned and showed his unwelcome visitor into a small apartment at the rear of the building, where two persons, strangely agitated, rose to receive him. Nodding shortly, Overton first assured himself that no person was lurking within earshot, then removed his hat and faced the couple. A single glance told him that the game rested in his own hands. Mr. Marvin and his wife were old, and seemed very feeble. They

were trembling with poorly-hidden agitation and anxiety.

"You came in answer to my letter, I suppose," began Overton. "You brought it with you, as I directed?"

"Yes, sir; here it is," responded Mr. Marvin, handing an open envelope to Overton, who glanced over the contents, then slipped it into his breast-pocket.

"That proves your identity sufficiently for me. Now, listen. Between fifteen and sixteen years ago you lost a child—a little girl. At that time you lived in Missouri. Your house took fire in the night and was burned to the ground. Only for two belated-travelers who noticed the glare, who burst in the door and dragged you two, besides three servants, out of the flames, you would have burned to death. You were nearly suffocated, as it was. Before any of you recovered sufficiently to speak, the building was in ruins. You called for your child—an only daughter, three years old. No one could tell you anything of its fate. And everybody, including yourself, believed the child perished in the flames."

"But she escaped—you wrote that she was yet living!" gasped the mother, terribly agitated.

"And I wrote the truth. As proof—see!" and he produced the locket which he had stolen from the Lamb cabin. "This trinket was around the child's neck that night. The child that wore it is still living. I alone know who and where she is. And I am the only person living who can restore her to your arms."

"You will! you cannot be so hard-hearted as to torture a mother's heart—"

"I will—provided," coldly responded Overton. "I have spent years and much money in solving the mystery. The first clew came to me strangely, years ago. In a fight with Kiowas I carried a wounded man to safety on my back. But he was too badly injured to recover. Before he died he gave me that locket and told me a story. He confessed that he stabbed a rich farmer, stole his child, and then fired the house, intending to give the alarm at the last moment. His object was to extort a large sum from you as ransom; but that same night, while sleeping in the woods, the child was stolen from him. He fancied he struck a clew to the thief, and followed it for over a month. When he returned, intending to tell you that the child was living, you had left the State; no one could tell him where you had gone. He did not tell me your name, for he died very suddenly; but I was interested in the matter, and giving it a good deal of my time, I struck oil at last. I know where your daughter is, and I will deliver her to you, when you pay me the sum I ask."

"Here is one-half down," and Mr. Marvin drew a bulky pocket-book from his bosom. "I will give you the other five thousand dollars when our child is restored to our arms."

"Good enough! I will not stop to count this at present. If it is all right, you shall meet your child. If wrong—"

"I pledge you my honor—"

"I am convinced, sir; you have too much at stake to think of playing me false. Now, listen. You will start from here on the day after tomorrow, at noon. There will be a guide call for you. If you fear double-dealing, you can take as many guards along as you please. This guide will lead you to your child. I will meet you with her. If you are satisfied, we will exchange goods; you taking the girl and I the money. If not—if there is any mistake—I will return this sum, and try my luck in some other quarter. Only—be sure and bring the money with you, for I am bound for San Francisco. And now—farewell until the day after to-morrow!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A WIFE FOR A LIFE.

BOWING low Colonel Overton left the room and re-entered the bar-room. The landlord met him, cringing and fawning like a whipped puppy.

"I want a room where I will be by myself. Send me something to eat, and a bottle of your best brandy. See that my horse is well fed, watered and rubbed down. Lively, now!"

The Mexican feared the half-breed too much to think of resenting his peremptory address, and cut no time to waste. In ten minutes Overton was seated at a small table which was well provided with food and liquor. First making sure that the door was secured and that no one was lurking around the one window of the room, he drew a chair up to the table and taking the pocket-book from his breast opened it, extracted its contents and rapidly ran them over. The task was not a long one, for the bills were all of large denomination, and he found that Mr. Marvin had kept good faith in the amount.

"So far so good!" he muttered, as he returned the money to his breast. "If the chief does not fail me! Little danger of that, though. His own good is too nearly concerned. Let him do his work well, and I'll have a good stake to start my new life with."

With a low, exultant laugh, and a glittering devil in his snaky eyes, the half-breed ate and drank heartily, little suspecting what eyes were watching him—had been watching him from

the moment when he first seated himself at the table to count over his money.

Half an hour later he left the house and mounted his horse, tossing a bit of silver to the ragged, disreputable fellow who held his animal's head. This man picked up the coin with a peculiar chuckle. And then he glided down the street, keeping his eyes fixed upon the tall half-breed.

Straight through the town rode Overton, striking into a road that led due north, trotting leisurely along as though in no ways pressed for time. His brain was busy, and he paid little attention to his surroundings. He was revolving the details of an intricate, diabolical plot that could only have found birth in the brain of one utterly devoid of all conscience, honor or humanity. What this scheme was, the sequel will show.

The sun sunk from view. The gray twilight settled over the prairie. Colonel Overton roused himself with a low, grating laugh. He believed that he had provided for every contingency, and impressed each detail upon his mind. Rising in his stirrups he cast a quick, sweeping glance around him. A hissing curse passed his lips as he wrenched his animal around and faced the back-trail. His eyes opened wider, and he brushed one hand across them as though to clear his vision.

"Gone! and I could have sworn that some one was dogging me! I saw him plain as day. Has he hidden? I don't see any cover, but it may be."

Overton drew a revolver and assured himself that the cylinder worked freely, and that the caps were well down upon their nipples. Holding the weapon ready for instant use he gave his horse free rein and trotted swiftly along upon his own trail, his eyes roving keenly, closely scrutinizing every foot of the ground. He rode beyond the spot where he had seen, or fancied he saw, the spy, then rapidly quartered the ground in every direction, though the prairie grass did not seem high enough to cover a dog, much less a man.

"It must have been fancy," Overton muttered at length, drawing rein for a last careful glance around him. "There is no one here. I must have sighted him if he had tried to run away. And yet—I could have sworn that a man was following me, afoot. I don't know what to think of it. Three times, now, have I been tricked in this same way. Is some one dogging me, or—can it be that I am haunted?"

As these words dropped from his lips, Overton swept his eyes around swiftly, and a peculiar tremor crept over him. Then, with a forced laugh, he plunged his spurs deep into the flanks of his mustang and dashed away, muttering:

"Man or spook, whichever it is, will need light heels to follow me now!"

For nearly an hour the half-breed kept up this rate of speed, then drew rein at the top of a small knoll; the only rising ground there was for miles around. Dismounting he drew a small powder-flask from his pocket, and pouring a portion of its contents into the palm of his hand he moistened it with spittle, rolling the mixture into a small ball. Covering this with dry powder and placing it all upon the point of his knife, he struck a match and ignited the spit-ball.

Holding the spluttering beacon above his head, he described several fantastic figures in the air with it, then flung the remainder far from him.

With a grunt of satisfaction Colonel Overton squatted upon the ground and lit his pipe for a smoke while awaiting an answer to his signal. He was not kept long in suspense. From the darkness beyond came the sharp, querulous barking of a coyote. Removing his pipe Overton imitated the sound. A minute later a tall, dark figure glided up the knoll and confronted the half-breed. Though the night was dark, the few stars above gave light sufficient for Overton to recognize in the Indian who stood before him the person whom he had signaled.

"You are welcome, chief," the half-breed said, using the Kiowa dialect. "I am glad to see you."

"My brother is late. Whirlwind has been waiting," coldly responded the red-man.

"That was not my fault. A dog was following my trail, and I had to stop his prowling. There is time enough. What I have to say will not take long."

"My ears are opened. Let Turn-over speak."

"Sit down and smoke. We are friends and brothers," said Overton, setting the example. "Now listen. The Whirlwind is a great chief. When his voice is raised for war, the whole Kiowa nation paint their faces, and his enemies smooth their scalp-locks ready for his knife."

"Turn-over has a long tongue. He can sing as sweet as the mocking-bird. He talks; Whirlwind does."

Overton winced at the rude, insulting tone of the Kiowa. He knew that the chief despised him, for good reasons. There was no love lost between them; but the half-breed's present policy was one of conciliation, and he affected

to receive the Indian's words as a compliment.

"The chief says well. Turn-over will show him that his arm is as long as his tongue when he wishes to serve a friend. Has Whirlwind found another white squaw to take the place of Gold Hair?"

"No; but the Mexican moon is near."

"There is a young white squaw still nearer. She is nice and fat, and lovely as the mountain partridge. Will Whirlwind reach forth his hand and take her to his lodge?"

"What bait must be put in Turn-over's hand?" shrewdly responded the chief.

"A scalp; nothing more. Listen. Many years ago a white brave lost his little pappoose. I found her. Her father is rich. He gave me some money to restore his child. I told him he should have her. I told him she was far away, and that it would take me two days to bring her to meet him. He promised to bring me more money. You will come, too, with your braves. You will lie hidden until the pale-face gives me the money. I will give him his daughter. Then you will come and take your squaw. Does Whirlwind see?"

"Yes. Whirlwind takes the squaw and the money."

"No; the squaw, but the money is mine. You will take the old white head captive. You will carry them off and threaten him with the torture-stake. He is very rich, and will give you much money, guns, pistols, knives, horses and anything you ask. When you get these goods, you can let him go free, or else take his scalp, just as you choose."

"Whose is the scalp I am to give Turn-over?"

"You know the man they call the Chaparral Wolf? He will be with me. You must kill him. When I see his scalp, then I will be paid for the white squaw. It is not much. He will not be thinking of danger. You can easily kill him."

"Turn-over is not a pappoose. His hand is heavy enough to kill a wolf," grunted Whirlwind.

"I have my reasons. I give you a big price to take his scalp for me. If you will not do it, say so. Grizzly Paw is ready to do the job."

"Grizzly Paw is an old squaw! He would run from a prairie-dog. Whirlwind will kill the wolf."

"Good! Remember, then. Two nights from this, at the Buffalo Hump. You will go there before the sun sets. Hide, and wait. When I raise my hand, you will strike."

The two conspirators arose, and with a few words, separated. Colonel Overton stood still, peering for several minutes into the darkness where the Kiowa had vanished. Then he mounted his horse and turning his head toward San Marcos, rode leisurely away.

"If he plays his part well—and he will not fail, for he is crazy for another white squaw—if he does not fail me, I will soon be free from his tyranny. I will be welcome to the Kiowa lodges, after this. Maybe I can play a double game there, too!"

Muttering to himself, giving hints of the complicated plots that seethed in his busy brain, Colonel Overton failed to notice the dark figure that uprose in his path until too late to avert his doom. A rifle or pistol flashed before his eyes, and with a hollow groan he fell backward from the saddle. A dark figure sprang upon him and tore open his coat. It took a pocket-book and some papers, then darted away in the darkness like a startled hare.

CHAPTER XV.

A PHANTOM OF THE NIGHT.

A DAZZLING jet of flame pierced the thickly-leaved bushes, a sharp report rung forth, and with a spasmodic start the condemned traitor flung back his head, only kept from falling upon his horse's haunches by the taut lasso. And the red blood spurted from a round hole directly between his eyes.

For an instant the Rangers stood speechless, so completely were they taken by surprise. But then, as they saw that their victim was snatched from them by death, and heard a crashing, floundering noise in the undergrowth, a wild yell of angry vengeance arose, and as one man they drew their weapons and dashed headlong for the point from whence the death-shot had sped.

Dashing Ned was among the foremost, and scarcely had he taken a dozen steps into the darkness, when he stumbled over a human figure, falling headlong to the ground. Without a moment's hesitation he rolled swiftly over and grappled with the unknown. The rough flannel shirt and long beard that met his grasp told the young Ranger captain that he was grappling with a man, though there was but a trifling resistance made. As he pinned the fellow to the ground, he uttered a sharp cry that speedily brought his scattered men to his side.

A dozen stout hands seized upon the captive and dragged him into the firelit glade, where the dead traitor dangled at the end of the lasso. His horse having shared the general alarm and joined the remainder.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Dashing Ned, as the red glow fell upon the face of his captive.

"Hector Lamb! What does this mean? What made you shoot Jim Brown?"

The giant settler trembled like a leaf, staring around with a piteous air of bewilderment, seemingly unable to reply. But if he could not, another could. The bushes parted and Mistress Nancy marched up to the side of her husband, slapping viciously at the hands which still grasped him.

"He didn't shoot nobody, Mister Conway! 'Nd I'd like to know what right you've got to be chasin' honest folks around, ketchin' 'em up an' luggin' 'em around like they was hog-thieves?"

"Some person shot that man—"

"I know it! they 'most blowed my ear off, too! But that's no reason you should treat my man that-a-way, is it? We came all this way to ax your help, but ef this is the way you treat your friends—"

"'Twas a mistake. Scatter out, boys! I'll answer for it that neither of these persons fired that shot. Keep in couples, make a wide sweep around, and fetch in whoever you can find. Lively, now!"

The Rangers obeyed Dashing Ned's orders with a promptness that spoke well for their discipline, and then the captain turned to the Lambs. It required no little tact on his part to soothe the ruffled dignity of Mistress Nancy, but a chance question concerning Minnie Lamb set her off on the right trail, when a few minutes sufficed to give Conway the main points of the girl's abduction.

A bitter oath escaped his lips as he saw how plain the proof pointed to Colonel Overton as the abductor.

"I have longed for a chance at him this year past, but he was too cunning. Luckily I can soon learn whether or no he committed this outrage. He can't stir a step but it will be reported to me. If he has stolen Minnie away, it will not be hard to rescue her and punish him. Do not fret, Aunt Nancy—"

A loud crashing in the bushes interrupted Dashing Ned, and one of the Rangers entered the glade, a white look of horror upon his face.

"Jest come out, boss! the devil's to work out in the open—jest come out an' see!"

That the man was in sober earnest could not be doubted for a moment. And it must be something very far from the ordinary run to so utterly unman one of his known courage.

Catching up his rifle Dashing Ned bade the Ranger lead the way, and plunged into the shrubbery, closely followed by the two Lambs.

"Thar it is now!" huskily uttered the Ranger, as they emerged upon the open prairie. "Good Lawd! that sech pizen things is 'lowed to run loose!"

Despite his sound good sense and tested courage, Dashing Ned felt a peculiar thrilling of awe as he stared at the weirdly fantastic object that was swiftly floating over the prairie in first one direction, then another. It bore the semblance of a human head; but a head that was composed of living fire, flaming blue and ghastly, now paling, anon flashing up into a brilliancy that dazzled the eyesight. It floated along at several yards above the prairie level, going even and smooth, giving forth no sound, leaving no scent behind it. It made a wide sweep, then turned and swiftly neared the spot where Dashing Ned stood. The Ranger captain raised his rifle, covered the ghastly object and pulled the trigger. As the weapon exploded the fiery head disappeared. There was no sound save the sharp echoes of the shot.

Dashing Ned uttered a shrill whistle as he darted toward the spot where his target had vanished, and relieved from that ghoulsome sight, the Rangers hastened to join him. But an instant later Nancy Lamb uttered a piercing shriek. The cause was self-evident. Far away upon the prairie shone the fiery head!

"Silence!" sharply cried Dashing Ned, as a superstitious murmur arose among his men. "Don't make asses of yourselves! That head on fire is a cunning trick, but after all it is nothing more than a trick. That head is either on or above the shoulders of a living man. What he is playing us for, I can't imagine, but I swear to find out if there's virtue in powder and lead. Go fetch the animals—lively!"

"It's comin', boss!" gasped the Ranger who had first brought Ned the tidings.

"Let it come. Ready with your weapons, boys. Wait for the word, then fire a foot or two under the head. If there's living flesh and blood—"

He paused abruptly. The fiery head had vanished as completely as though it had never been!

"Slick enough, but it won't work. Get the horses, and we'll soon corral this will-o'-the-wisp," persisted Dashing Ned, thoroughly aroused.

His order was obeyed with commendable promptness, but ere the Rangers returned the flaming head was again visible, this time nearly a quarter of a mile distant, remaining motionless. At a word from their leader the Rangers mounted, and even the two Lambs scrambled upon their mules. Straight for the fiery head Dashing Ned led the way, trotting swiftly, his weapons ready for use.

The vision seemed to divine his purpose, for at nearly the same instant it moved ahead in a straight course. The men eyed it closely, but their uneasiness was not lessened as they noted how evenly it floated. They did not believe that the horse was ever foaled that could run, pace or trot so smoothly, and nothing but their strong love and fidelity to their young leader kept them from turning tail and beating a retreat at full speed.

Dashing Ned gave the word and urged his animal on at breakneck speed, resolved to run the phantom head down. Mile after mile was traversed, but the relative distance dividing them remained the same. The phantom seemed to measure its speed by theirs. Convinced at length that the unknown held the heels of them, Ned resolved to try another plan.

Leaping to the ground he pulled up a quantity of dry grass and struck a light. Then he called off five of his most trusty followers, pointing ahead, where the phantom shone motionless as though awaiting their coming.

"We will divide, three on a side, and try to surround the rascal. The rest will wait here, keeping up the fire. He will think we have given over the chase in disgust, and so we can trap him easily. Close in on him if you can, but if not, drop him cold! Strike out, now: keep as quiet as you can."

Followed by his two comrades, proceeding cautiously and keeping out of a line with the fire, Dashing Ned rode in a wide semicircle, hoping to gain the further side of the phantom. For some minutes the prospect of success seemed fair; but then the head vanished, only to reappear as suddenly, far ahead. Twice more this occurred, until even Ned became convinced that the unknown was too cunning to be trapped by such means, and discharged his rifle as a signal for his men to join him.

"We'll run him down if it takes a month! Spread out in a line so he can't double, then forward!"

These tactics were kept up for full two hours longer; until the stars told that they were drawing near. The fiery head still led them. Doggedly the Rangers pursued, urging their jaded animals on as rapidly as possible.

"An hour longer and we'll be able to see what supports that head," muttered Dashing Ned.

But this was not to be. Suddenly the phantom paused, remaining motionless until the Rangers were within three hundred yards, then vanishing as mysteriously as before. And from the place where it had gleamed, a ball of fire shot high up into the air, describing a beautiful parabola, flickering less and less brightly as it lay upon the ground.

Dashing Ned galloped forward, dismounted and secured the ball. As he did so he felt a bit of paper crackle in his hand.

CHAPTER XVI.

"EQUALITY EPH" IN A RAGE.

THOSE were minutes fraught with horror to Mark Bird as he lay helplessly beside what he feared was the corpse of his cousin. Sharply as he listened he could not detect the faintest sign of life; no sound of breathing, no throbbing of blood in the arm that lightly touched his side. And his heart grew deathly sick as he was forced to believe that the midnight assassin had done his work only too well.

Fortunately for the young man's senses there came an interruption to his horrible brooding. The door opened and two men entered, one bearing a liberal supply of roasted meat in a tin dish, the other with a canteen of water and a pot of hot coffee.

"Reckon you're ready fer grub, ain't ye, critters?" the foremost fellow grinned, as he deposited his burden upon the floor.

But his humor instantly changed as his gaze fell upon the white, rigid face of Kirke Howard. With a curse of angry alarm he stooped over the prisoner, hastily cutting his bonds and tearing the cruel gag from between his jaws.

"He ain't dead! Gimme that water, Dave—run steal or borrow some whisky. Lively, boy!"

Holding the canteen several feet above the face of the senseless captive, the outlaw suffered the cold spring water to fall in a steady stream on the upturned features. The success of this treatment was soon evident. With a gasping moan, Howard opened his eyes. The outlaw chuckled with a grim pleasure as he extended his hand for the flask of whisky which his comrade had obtained.

"Take a sniff o' this, boss," he said, raising Howard's head. "Sol you look more like it, now. I wonder do you al'ays sleep as sound as that?"

"Look at them finger prents on his throat—" began the lad, but his wondering exclamation was cut short by the heavy hand of his companion striking across his lips.

"You don't want to talk so durned much, Limpy. Too long a tongue ain't healthy; mind that."

"You can't stop my tongue so easy," huskily interposed Mark Bird, tenderly fingering his swollen throat. "Some cowardly fiends tried to murder us last night—"

"You kin tell all that to the boss, critter," coolly interrupted the outlaw. "You're to be

brung to him in hafe an hour. Better eat an' drink while you kin. It may be your last chaine. Old Eph's on his high hoss this mornin'."

"Eat if you can, Mark," muttered Howard, moistening his parched throat. "We will need all our strength before we get out of this scrape."

"You're right, Kirke. I don't suppose it would spite these villains one mite if we were to starve ourselves, and I'd hate to go under owing them so much. There are some debts one can easily forgive, but not such as this. If I live they'll have good cause to wish they'd done up their work better last night."

"Careful, Mark!" muttered Howard, with a warning glance. "These fellows are listening eagerly. Be wary; there was more than murder intended last night. *My papers are gone!*"

"But why so much trouble, when they could have taken them openly? I don't understand!"

"Time's up!" interrupted the outlaw, arising. "The cap'n wants to see you two critters, an' I'm to fetch you afore him. Mind, you can't git away, an' I've got orders to lay ye out ef you try any tricks. Nothin' like startin' flat-footed's my motto. Roust up, now!"

The prisoners obeyed in silence. If they had thought of attempting to escape by a bold dash, the moment they emerged from the hut, the worse than folly of such a course was made evident. A dozen or more of rough, armed men were lounging about the clearing, and ere a dozen steps could be taken, the prisoners would have been shot down or else surrounded and overpowered by mere weight of numbers.

When near the center of the clearing, the outlaw who guarded the cousins paused and rudely saluted a man who was reclining upon a pile of skins before the door of a hut. The prisoners glanced curiously at this man. From the respectful demeanor of their free and easy guard, they knew that they stood before the chief of outlaws—a bold, daring rascal whose name was only too well known throughout South-western Texas.

Tall and finely formed, his face was still fiercely handsome, though dissipation and an unregulated career had marred both face and figure. This was the man whose fierce lawlessness and reckless cruelty had gained for him the significant *sobriquet*: the Wolf of the Chaparral. He was proud of the title, and never lost an opportunity of proving its fitness. Of late days he had selected another *nom de guerre*, which he fancied still better indicated his chosen profession; and the fame of "Equality Eph" bade fair to equal that gained by the Chaparral Wolf.

"I suppose you know who I am, gentlemen?" he uttered, in a low, soft tone, toying with a revolver butt at his waist.

"A horse-thief, footpad and woman-thief," promptly responded Mark Bird. "All this, and worse, for aught I know."

"And your master, you might add," the outlaw said, in the same low, soft tone, but with a gathering fire in his eyes. "I have but to lift my finger, and you are food for dogs. But I did not send for you simply to bandy epithets. You admitted, last night, that your names were Kirke Howard and Mark Bird; that you came to Texas in answer to a letter from one David Woodson. And I confessed that I am Woodson. I had an object in writing that letter, of course. I knew that it would bring you out here; that you would fetch with you papers of importance to prove your connection with the persons who died at Live Oak Ranch—"

"Who were foully murdered, you mean," bitterly interrupted Howard.

"Murdered, if the word suits you better," laughed Equality Eph. "They are dead, at any rate. There has been an enormous fortune left to that man or his heirs. This fortune has fallen to you. Now, have you brought the papers that proved your right to this property?"

"You know that I did," bitterly uttered Howard.

"I suspected as much; but how should I know?"

"Bah! are we fools? For what reason did you have us bound and gagged last night?"

"Because you were interfering in a matter that did not concern you. You were intruding upon the privacy of a young lady friend of mine, and I took the simplest method of checking your curiosity; nothing more."

"Indeed! and pray how do you explain the rest? Why did you steal upon us in the dead of night, throttle us and steal away the papers which you now so brazenly demand? Look! my throat bears the mark of your assassin fingers even yet!"

"Are you crazy, man?" ejaculated Equality Eph, as he sprung erect. "I never visited you last night. I never assaulted you, never touched a paper—bah! you are trying to blind me. Will you give me those documents, or must I have you searched?"

"I have them not. You did your work too well last night."

At a motion from their chief, two men advanced and thoroughly searched the prisoners, failing to discover anything. Cursing furiously, Equality Eph dashed off to the hut where the cousins had been confined, and searched in every corner, every crack and crevice, on the

suspicion that they had suspected his purpose, and sought to foil it by concealing the documents. But his search was in vain.

As he emerged, his men shrunk aside in fear and trembling, so terrible was his rage. Confronting Howard he thrust a cocked revolver into his face, muttering in a strained, deadly tone:

"Tell me where you have hidden those papers, or by the living Eternal! I'll blow your brains out!"

"If I knew where they were, I'd never utter a word while you try to scare me into confession," quietly said Kirke. "Put aside your weapon, and act more like a man."

For one moment the Chaparral Wolf hesitated, and every one present felt that the rash young fellow had sealed his doom. But the pistol was lowered, undischarged.

"Now you're acting half-way decent," added Howard. "You play your part well, but you should remember that we have been behind the scenes. You say that you did not rob us. Of course we cannot doubt a gentleman of honor. I suppose you sent some of your fellows to do the dirty work. If so, ask them for the papers, not us."

"Upon your word of honor these papers were stolen from you, last night?" demanded the outlaw.

"I have said so once; that is enough,"

"Tell me the whole affair; just how it occurred."

"First; why are you so anxious to obtain possession of the papers? They cannot possibly interest you."

"They interest me so much that with them, and you dead, I could easily obtain every dollar of that fortune. Now, answer my question."

Though sorely puzzled by the outlaw's assertion, Howard no longer refused, but, aided by Mark, gave the clearest explanation he could to the mysterious event of the past night.

"Who was on guard at the cage, last night, Evans?" demanded Equality Eph, of his nearest follower.

"Tom Kennedy, cap'n," was the prompt reply.

"Where is he? go send him here. I can't understand it," he muttered, as to himself. "Tom is true as steel. And yet there has been treachery somewhere. If I can find out where!"

Evans soon returned, accompanied by Kennedy, who looked as though he had just been awakened. For a few moments the Wolf eyed him keenly, seeking to read the truth. His lips parted to speak; at that instant Tom Kennedy sprang high into the air, falling dead, upon his face! There was no visible wound; there was no report of either gun or pistol. Yet the outlaw was stone dead!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WOLF SEEKS ITS LAIR.

THE outlaws stared in open-mouthed astonishment as their comrade fell heavily to the earth. There had been no report of rifle or pistol, no glitter of a knife, nor had any person touched Tom Kennedy with so much as a finger-tip. They fancied he had slipped and fallen, possibly overtaken by a fit; all but Equality Eph. He recalled the mysterious death of his spy at San Antonio, and without stooping to examine the fallen guard, he knew that he, too, was dead. But by what means? By whose hands? These questions flashed rapidly through the outlaw's brain, but he did not give them utterance. One swift glance around, and his determination was taken.

"Scatter and beat the brush, boys! There's an assassin near at hand. He's murdered poor Kennedy. Bring him in alive if you can, but take him—"

Equality Eph bit his sentence short off and raised a revolver with a fierce snarl, as a man broke through the line of close-growing shrubbery and entered the little clearing. But the weapon was not discharged. Just in the nick of time the outlaw chief recognized one of his own men in the new-comer. He saw, too, that the fellow was greatly excited, and at once jumped to the conclusion that he had encountered the mysterious slayer.

"Quick! where is he?—which way did he go?" he cried, springing forward to meet the man.

"They're out yender—nigh a hundred! Comin' right in 'long the trail. The jig's up, boss!"

Equality Eph stared in mute amazement. But almost instantly he divined the mistake.

"What did you come to report? who is out there?"

"The Rangers—Dashin' Ned—blast him! He's got a hull regiment o' critters—"

At this moment Martin, the lieutenant of the band, hastened into the clearing. His face was troubled, though his voice was cool and steady.

"I can get nothing out of this fool! Tell me what is up, Martin," hurriedly demanded Equality Eph.

"Dashing Ned and his hounds have run us down. He has about fifty men. They are entering the chaparral now. I have given the boys on guard their directions, and they will delay, if not entirely baffle him. I am here for your orders. Is it fight, or run?"

"Run, if we can, without too much risk. There's nothing but hard knocks to be won of those brutes. Yet—if we were not so incumbered with the women and prisoners, I'd ask nothing better than a brush."

"You can send them on to the Den in charge of two or three men," said Martin.

"No. There is too much at stake to risk it now. Do you take as many men as you wish, and do the best you can with those hounds. Lead them astray if you can; keep them back as long as possible, without letting them close hand to hand. Go, now. I'll give you the word when we are ready for you to fall back."

"Take your time, captain. Dashing Ned will find his hands full, unless I greatly mistake."

Collecting a dozen men the lieutenant hastened back to the scene of danger with all the ardor of a bridegroom seeking his new-made bride. Black and sin-stained though his heart was, the fear of mortal man never found lodgment therein.

"There is danger brewing, father?" uttered a clear, soft voice, and as Equality Eph turned quickly he encountered the bright glance of Missouri Belle. "I caught a portion of what Martin said. Tell me what it is, that I may know how to act."

"Dashing Ned has led his Rangers down upon us. We could fight him, but there would be more loss than we can afford. Go get your horse ready. We're bound for Black swamp. Hasten! there is no time to lose!"

"And the prisoners?" asked Belle, with a glance to where the cousins stood, still guarded by Evans.

"They go with us, of course. Only for them and you, I would fight this young cur, and send him yelping to his last home. But my time will come. Go now; do as I bid you."

Without more words Missouri Belle obeyed. Equality Eph called another of his men and turned over to him and Evans the care of the two prisoners.

"Put them on horseback; tie their feet together, and their hands behind their backs. You will ride with them, and in case of the worst—if the Rangers press us too hard, and there is danger of a rescue, blow out their brains. Make sure work of him, first," and the outlaw touched Kirke Howard upon the shoulder.

The clearing was now a scene of confusion. A dozen or more women were hurrying to and fro, some of them bearing babes at their breasts, others scolding older children into a terrified silence. The remaining men were hastily preparing horses for the road, and packing up the least cumbersome articles of their plunder.

From near the edge of the chaparral, still a mile or more distant, there came a faint, single report, followed by several other shots. Equality Eph frowned uneasily. He knew that the Rangers must be pressing their advance stubbornly. With angry impatience he urged his men to renewed exertion, and so successfully that ten minutes later the majority were in the saddle, leaving the other animals, saddled and bridled, secured to the surrounding trees, ready for the outlaws under Martin when they should be forced to fall back.

Equality Eph and his daughter rode beside the cousins. Without mincing his words the former told them that at the least trouble they gave, or at the first sign of an attempted rescue, they would be at once put to death.

For several minutes the party wound along the narrow trail, listening to the sounds from the rear. The report of fire-arms were growing more frequent, and instead of growing fainter, sounded nearer and more distinct. Equality Eph grated his teeth in anger as he was forced to believe that his men were being forced back.

"Eternal curses on that Martin!" he snarled. "If he must retreat, why don't he take another trail? The cowardly fool is bringing them straight upon our backs!"

"There is some one following us at speed," said Belle, drawing rein and bending her head. "I can hear the stroke of a horse's hoofs upon the beaten trail."

Ordering the others to press on, Equality Eph halted, looking to his weapons. But these were not required just at present. A single rider forged in view, and reined his panting horse in at their feet. Without giving him time to speak, the Wolf exclaimed:

"Why is Martin bringing these hounds on our trail? Why did he not obey orders and lead them toward the Kiowa trail?"

"We did the best we knewed, cap'n; but luck was ag'in' us," hurriedly but deprecatingly answered the outlaw. "Martin started us on that trail, an' we thought all was goin' on right, but all to oncet the Rangers struck out for the clearin', straight as a die. We tried to head 'em off, but 'twasn't no use. You know how bad the bresh is. They kep' on, an' we could only foller an' pester 'em all we knewed. Martin sent me on ahead an' I tuck a boss an' come to tell you what was up. In less'n a quarter them imps 'll be here."

"Ride on and tell the men to wait for us at the further side of the Long Opening," abruptly ordered Missouri Belle. "Nay," she added, as

Equality Eph stared at her in surprise, "I have my reasons, father. I think I can see a way out of this scrape. Come; we can talk as we ride along. I can do nothing until we have passed the fork in the trail."

They trotted along the trail at a leisurely rate, the sounds of firing drawing nearer with every minute. In a few well-chosen sentences Belle revealed her plan; one of no little danger to herself, but she made light of this, nor did the Wolf seem greatly troubled.

After passing a point where the trail divided, the twain drew rein, and the girl added:

"Do you ride on and prepare the men. Believe me, it will all come about as I say. Martin is no fool, and he will be ready to seize the opportunity. Go, now; we will meet again, soon."

"I will do as you say, Belle. I hope all will turn out well. You are a good child, and I hate to leave such work to you. Let me stay in your place."

"You would only fail, father. Go—there is no time to lose. Go—and God guard you!"

The outlaw pressed his lips to her brow, then urged his horse along the beaten trail.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WOLVES AND MASTIFFS.

THERE was a peculiar, cloying smell about the flickering fireball as Dashing Ned picked it up from the ground that at once gave him a clew to the mystery of the fiery head. He knew that the ghastly, bluish light was produced by a chemical preparation, in all probability phosphorated ether or some kindred agent. But who was playing such a bold trick? what could be his object?

As he asked himself this question, Dashing Ned felt the bit of paper rattle among the grass blades which were wound around it. Crouching down he struck a match and ignited a handful of dry grass. By this light he succeeded in deciphering the scroll. There was neither address nor signature.

"Chaparral due east. Look for a broken-topped tree and a hawk's nest. Search closely and you will find a treasure."

Dashing Ned stamped out the fire, and gave the word for his men to dismount and picket their animals, since the hunt was up until day, at least. When this was accomplished, he called his men together and told them what was written upon the paper, together with his solution of the fiery head.

"No man would run such a risk for nothing. I can't imagine the motive, but I'll find out before I quit the trail. Where's Lamb?"

"Ef you mean the critter you ketch'd back yender, cap'n, they dropped out o' the chase good two hours ago. Mules gin out, I reckon."

"It doesn't matter much," Dashing Ned muttered, more to himself than the Ranger. "Double Dan will make his report in plenty time, and much sooner than we could learn anything by taking the trail."

With the first ray of light Dashing Ned set to work, and his men joined him with even more than usual ardor when they noticed the clear, fresh trail left by a shod horse. Feeling assured that they were dealing with one of mortal flesh and blood, instead of a supernatural being, they were, one and all, eager to make amends for the past night.

The trail led straight for a long line of timber, due east, and distant less than one mile. Halting when just beyond rifle-shot, Dashing Ned and two men rode ahead, following the trail until it entered the undergrowth that fringed the chaparral.

"That's the broken-topped tree, an' it's got a nest in it, too!" muttered Fred Meyer; a grizzled and weather-beaten plainsman.

"I see; we'll dismount and take it afoot," said Conway, resolutely. "There may be a trap set for us, but even so, the boys will take big pay for anything that befalls us. Look to our weapons and keep an eye out for snags."

Making a signal for the Rangers to hold their places until further orders, Dashing Ned pushed into the dense shrubbery, heading for the broken tree. Nothing but natural obstacles interfered with their progress, and two minutes later he stood beside the tree. A square of white paper was pinned to the bark with a sharp thorn. Eagerly watched by his men the young captain secured this, and read aloud the words it contained:

"You are in earnest, and that is good. This trail will lead you to the haunt of the man whom you have sought so long. His force does not outnumber yours. If you are in the humor, the howl of the Chaparral Wolf will never more insult the ears of honest men. Send your scouts ahead to clear the trail. It is guarded, though carelessly. Then press on, nor pause until your work is done."

"DOUBLE SIGHT, THE DEATH: NOT."

"Ef he's on our side, it's all right," muttered Meyer, but with an uneasy glance around him.

"If what he says is true, he's the best friend we ever struck!" and Dashing Ned's flashing eye told how sincere were his words. "Lay low and watch the trail, while I go call up the boys."

Several men were left to bring up the horses, while the main force advanced upon foot, preceded by four chosen scouts, who were directed

to press ahead and spy out the position and strength of the outlaws, then to return and report, if possible without raising an alarm.

This plan of operations was well conceived, but it was doomed to miscarry. The outlaws who were guarding the trail, though they permitted the Rangers to penetrate the chaparral unheralded, discovered the threatening danger in time to send a runner to camp with the tidings and an appeal for aid. This they did with such caution that the Rangers suspected nothing until just before they reached a point where the trail divided, one to the left hand or eastern division, which was known among the Wolves as the Kiowa trail, the other one leading to the clearing where the Chaparral Wolf had located. At this point the guards first made their presence felt. One of them stepped out into full view, and deliberately picking his man, brought him down with a bullet through the brain. The instant he fired, he leaped into the bushes, barely avoiding the few hasty shots discharged at him by the surprised Rangers. Then he took to flight along the winding trail, feeling assured that the Rangers, thirsting for revenge, would follow him without hesitation. Nor did he mistake, for, guided by the sound of his hasty flight, and believing that he would naturally hasten to join his fellows, the Rangers, led by Dashing Ned, struck into the Kiowa trail without a moment's hesitation.

The supposed fugitives, aided by their thorough knowledge of the ground, easily kept ahead, pausing now and then to fire a shot to the rear, the more surely to draw the Rangers astray. These shots were answered, but since the first rifle was discharged, no blood had been drawn, since the marksmen were guided by sound alone.

Thus far the plans of the outlaws succeeded to perfection, but now came a change, disastrous to their hopes. Martin, in his eagerness to save the encampment, entered a side trail that intersected the Kiowa trail, but miscalculating, came out just to the rear of the Rangers, cutting them off from their horses. Believing himself drawn into an ambush, Dashing Ned gave the word and led a charge to regain their horses. For a few minutes the struggle was fierce and deadly. Though barely a dozen in number, the Wolves were reckless, and the thick underbrush stood them in good stead. No solid charge could be made, and each man had to fight on his own hook. But even here weight of numbers prevailed, and the Rangers cut their way through to their animals, though, by this time, Dashing Ned saw his mistake, and was pretty well aware what force he was opposing. He had just given the word to spread out and surround the enemy, when Fred Meyer came up and made a startling disclosure.

He had passed the guards unseen, and after narrowly escaping the party led by Martin, he followed the trail to the clearing and discovered the village of the Chaparral Wolf. He made all haste back to report.

This was enough for Dashing Ned. Rescinding his order, he fell back until the fork of the trail was regained. Then, by a simple maneuver, he turned the flank of the outlaws under Martin, and spreading out so as to hold them in check, he struck out for the clearing. Fiercely the Wolves raged when they saw how they were tricked, but when two more of their number had paid the penalty of their rashness, the remainder learned prudence. They hung closely upon the heels of the Rangers, seeking to inflict all the loss possible, as well as to delay them until those at the village could find safety in flight. Martin dispatched a runner with word of their failure, then fought his men as well as he was able. By taking a side trail, the messenger succeeded in stealing past the Rangers, and though hotly pursued, reached the deserted clearing, took one of the horses and bore the evil news to Equality Eph as already detailed.

Close upon his heels the Rangers entered the opening, and spreading his men out to hold the Wolves in check, Dashing Ned hastily searched the village and took possession of the horses left there for Martin and his men.

"Scatter the fires and burn the cabins!" ordered Conway, and within five minutes every hut in the place was ignited beyond redemption.

This accomplished, he sent several men along the fresh trail to make sure that the flight of the Wolves was genuine, and not a blind, covering an ambush.

Martin made a strenuous effort to skirt the clearing and regain the trail ahead of the Rangers, but failed for want of time. Dashing Ned paused only to make sure that the huts were fairly ablaze, then pressed on to overtake his scouts. By this prompt movement the Wolves were again thrown in the rear, and once more the annoying skirmishing marked the march.

As a man fell dead by his side, Dashing Ned resolved to put a stop to the matter, and quietly passing the word for half a dozen of his men to press on until a convenient spot for an ambush was found, when they were to slip aside from the trail, he rode on ready for the climax.

Suspecting nothing, the Wolves came on; they passed the spot where the eager Rangers lay in covert. A clear whistle was the first inkling

they had of their danger. Before they could do aught to avert their doom, two-thirds of their number were shot down from ambush. Dashing Ned and his men charged; taken between two fires, the Wolves fought gamely, asking nor receiving quarter. The last to fall, Martin shot a Ranger through the brain even as death seized him.

Leaving his dead to be cared for when his work should be completed, Dashing Ned pressed along the trail with redoubled ardor, and now that there was nothing to be apprehended from the rear, he took the lead in person.

The trail was plain before him, and very fresh. His heart beat high at the favorable prospect of accomplishing the stern duty he had set himself, when—

"Halt! one step nearer, and I fire!"

Before him, blocking the narrow trail, mounted upon her spotted mustang, sat Missouri Belle, the child of the Chaparral Wolf! And her revolver covered the heart of the Ranger captain.

CHAPTER XIX.

A HUMAN SNAKE.

FROM the hour of his leaving San Antonio, the day after the festivities, there was not an action, scarce a step of Colonel Overton's that was not watched and as carefully noted by a cunning and adroit spy. Dashing Ned knew what he was about when he selected Double Dan for this duty. A better qualified man did not live. Of that cool courage that carries a man unflinchingly up to certain death, simply because duty calls; shrewd and ready-witted; perfectly versed in wood and prairie craft; a master of his weapons; as swift and tireless of foot as a prairie wolf; when Double Dan once struck a trail, a bloodhound could as easily be choked off.

"You will take the trail and follow that man night and day, no matter where he goes or what he does. Keep a record of everything. Never let him slip you until you can either safely swear that he is innocent of what we suspect, or until you know that he is connected with Equality Eph and his gang. If you think you can do this, good; if you doubt, say so, and I'll send Fred Meyer instead."

The two men were rivals in their claims as scouts, and no better incentive could be offered than this hint, as the Ranger captain well knew. And from that hour Double Dan was Colonel Overton's shadow.

For several days his vigilance was unrewarded, but in his heart Double Dan felt that his hour would come, and he was right. He saw the meeting between Overton and Grizzly Paw, the Lipan sub-chief, though he was unable to steal near enough to overhear their talk. When they separated, the Indian to collect his braves, the other to haunt the vicinity of the Lamb ranch, Double Dan watched Overton closer than ever.

And thus it was that while Overton was trailing Minnie Lamb to her fishing-place, he himself was shadowed so skillfully that not the faintest suspicion of mischief entered his mind or those of his red-skinned accomplices.

Squatting low in the midst of a dense mass of vines, Double Dan overheard every word of the conversation between Overton and his intended victim, and even witnessed the latter part of the interview, chuckling beneath his breath as the half-breed was knocked senseless beneath the water by the desperate maiden. He also saw her subsequent capture and the rescue of Overton from drowning, by the Lipans. Nor did he miss one word of what followed.

When Grizzly Paw strode away, followed by his braves in charge of Minnie Lamb, and Colonel Overton retraced his steps toward the copse in which his horse was hidden, Double Dan wriggled out of his snug covert, his puckered and wrinkled countenance all aglow. And his double voice blended curiously as he muttered to himself:

"Ef I hain't struck it rich, I don't want a cent! Lawd! ef the boss ondy knowed I wouldn't be cuss an' r'ar an' sling things endways? Waal, I should re-mark! S'pose he *did* know; what'd he tell me? 'Go fer my sweetness, Double Dan, you pizen critter! Bu'st that ornery Grizzly Paw—set down on his pizen bucks ontel they squeal blue murder! Let Turn-over go to thunder, but fetch me back my lump o' sugar! That's what he would say; but he ain't yar, an' I'm gwine to stick to what orders I've got a'ready. Yar's fer your skelp, Turn-over! Me 'nd my brother is gwin' fer ye: the twins o' Bitter Root is a-b'ilin' over on your trail! Wake snakes an' hunt your hole!"

Past the log cabin, over the river and up the valley the half-breed sped, and after him came Double Dan, running by sight whenever there were bushes or other cover convenient for hiding in should the colonel look behind him; when the ground was open, running by sight and hearing. To most men the task would have been a severe if not an impossible one; but to Double Dan such work seemed little more than play. The long miles that he ran over that afternoon scarce dampened his leathery skin, and when the town of San Marcos was sighted, and

he became satisfied that Overton was bound thither, Double Dan fell into a walk, his breathing as even and regular as though he had merely been taking a stroll for the good of his appetite.

As he reached the last bit of cover, and not caring to expose himself too soon, the spy squatted down, filled his pipe, and while smoking summed up his discoveries of that day.

"What did he tell the Injun? Take the gal to the Wolf of the Chaparral—which means Equality Eph—an' you'll git heaps o' whisky. Ef my brother wasn't so durned contrary—ef we was the kind o' twins what kin travel two ways to once—what a soft snap that'd 'a' bin! By jest follerin' them red-skins—but orders is orders. The boss said: 'You foller Turn-over,' an' I'm bound fer to do it."

"Then what'd he say! 'You take this billy-duck an' give it to the Wolf; likewise the gal.' Ef that don't show the two pizen critters is workin' in cahoot, then I don't want a cent! You kin kick an' squirm, Turn-over, but I've got the ondergrip on ye, an' I never lose my holts!"

"Then what does he say to the gal—which is the cap'n's sweetness? Says he: 'I'll see ye ag'in, honey, in a couple of days.' What does that pan out? The gal goes to Equality Eph's keer, then ef he wants to see her ag'in, Turn-over must nat'ally 'tend to call on him. An' ef he calls on him, won't I be 'long, too? An' won't that fetch the two trails into one? Good Lord! yes!" And the bass-falsetto laugh of Double Dan rung out in high glee, as he once more resumed his trailing.

On entering the town, almost the first object that met Double Dan's eye was the horse of Overton standing before the dingy inn. Trusting in his disguise, the spy boldly entered the bar-room, finding the landlord alone, white and trembling from his interview with the colonel. At nearly the same moment Overton summoned him, and demanded refreshments in a private room. As the Mexican returned from showing his dreaded customer to his room, he was accosted by Dan. Again the wretched fellow seemed on the rack.

"You know who I be. You hain't fergot the warnin' the boss give you, nuther. I'm here on business. Is they any way I kin git a look at that man you jest tuck to a room? Ef you kin manidge this, it'll be one count in your favor when the settlement comes."

Afraid to trust his tongue, the landlord led Double Dan into an adjoining room, and showed him a small peep-hole which commanded the table at which Overton sat. Leaving Dan here, he hastened to fill the half-breed's order.

From this loop-hole, Dan saw Overton count over the money he had just received from the Marvins, and overheard his muttered comments. And it was from his hands that, half an hour later, Colonel Overton received his horse.

Warning to the hunt Double Dan followed Overton through the town and over the prairie, dogging him like a human sleuth-hound. As the sun set and the shades of night began to deepen, he quickened his pace and gradually lessened the distance which had divided him and his quarry, for Overton was now riding over the prairie where there was no regular trail, and he could afford to run no risks.

It was at this moment that Overton awoke from his deep thinking, and cast a keen glance around him. Though Double Dan instantly fell flat upon his face, he knew that he had been seen. Peering through the grass-blades, the spy saw Overton wheel and dash toward him. There was too much at stake to risk an encounter, and Double Dan crawled rapidly away from the trail at right-angles. Fortune still stood his friend, for he came upon a burrow of the prairie-wolf, and grasping a "tumble-weed"—one of the curiosities of the prairie—he backed into the hole, though not without a suspicion that he might be disagreeably saluted by the occupants of the burrow, perhaps a rattlesnake, and drawing himself into a wonderfully small compass, pulled the tumble-weed over his head. Thus it was that the close search of the half-breed was in vain, though more than once he passed within a dozen feet of his prey, had he only known it.

Guided by his ear, Double Dan crawled from his novel refuge, and once more took the trail, now befriended by the gloom. He was not fifty yards from the little knoll when Overton lit his signal, and waiting patiently the spy was at length rewarded by seeing a second figure outlined against the sky-line. As soon as he saw them settle down, and caught the faint fumes of burning tobacco, he stole stealthily up to the mound. Lying flat upon his stomach, and making sure that the wind was in his favor, lest the horses should scent his presence, he ventured still closer until not twenty feet divided him from the conspirators, and their every word was distinctly audible.

The emotions with which he listened to the diabolical plot which Overton divulged, can readily be imagined. His blood tingled with a fierce joy as he saw how easy it would be to turn the whole game into the channel of justice, and in his eagerness to not miss a word, he narrowly escaped being discovered by the Whirlwind

when, the interview over, the Kiowa left the knoll.

Forced to wait until the savage was beyond ear-shot, Double Dan allowed Overton to get quite a little start of him, but soon regained the lost distance. He was congratulating himself upon the complete success which had rewarded his efforts, when Overton abruptly drew rein, a bright flash lit up the gloom, and with the sharp report the half-breed fell from his horse. Taken so completely by surprise, Double Dan stood amazed for near a minute. He saw a man spring upon Overton, and tear open his clothes. At this a flood of light filled his brain, and with a loud yell he sprang toward the assassin. With a yell of alarm the fellow left his victim and fled at top speed through the night.

CHAPTER XX.

HONOR FOR LOVE.

"HALT! or I fire! I command this trail, and no man passes here without my permission!"

A very queen of the wild wood looked Missouri Belle as she uttered these words, clear and imperious. Never had she looked so thoroughly, so intoxicatingly beautiful as then. Her eyes were twin stars, her face pale, save where two brilliant spots of scarlet marked her cheeks; her whole being was full of life and fire. Framed in with the dense green foliage and brown, drooping boughs, she formed a rare picture with her bright, close-fitting dress, her gleaming weapons, her spotted mustang, and her defiant demeanor. Seated astride in the Mexican fashion, with both arms outstretched and a cocked revolver in each hand, her superb, finely-developed figure was thoroughly displayed. The "paint-mustang," too, seemed to fully enter into the spirit of the scene, for it stood as firm and motionless as a rock, though its eyes shone brightly from beneath its shaggy forelock.

Dashing Ned drew rein with a cry, not of alarm but of surprise the most profound. And, his gaze riveted upon that fair face, he sat his horse like one petrified.

"The p'izen critters 'll git clean off, boss!" uttered Fred Meyer, in his eagerness. "Shell I c'lar the track?"

As he spoke the reckless old Ranger flung forward his rifle, though it may be doubted whether or no he would have put his suggestion into operation even if left alone, wrought up as his worst passions had been. But the strong hand of Dashing Ned grasped the rifle-barrel and with the same movement wrested it from the Ranger's grasp and hurled the weapon into the bushes. If nothing else Meyer's words were of service in arousing the captain.

"Isola! Great heavens! what brings you here?"

Was it acting? was Missouri Belle simply carrying out the plan she had confided to her father a few minutes before? Or was the white shade that chased the roses from her cheek beyond her control? What meant that wild, hunted look that filled her eyes?

With a low cry she wheeled her mustang and disappeared amid the timber. As though moved by the same impulse Dashing Ned urged his horse forward, while the Rangers pressed close upon his heels. On at a reckless speed until the dense undergrowth grew thinner, finally giving place to a long, narrow opening that apparently extended for miles both east and west.

As he broke through the brush, Dashing Ned, guided by his ear, saw Missouri Belle riding at full speed down this natural race-course, heading toward the east. A single glance showed him that the trail of the retreating Wolves led directly across the opening. For a brief space he hesitated. Duty bade him pursue the outlaws; but his heart opposed. Love and a sickening doubt urged him to overtake the fair fugitive; and love conquered.

"Wait here for me," he said, turning to his lieutenant and forcing himself to speak deliberately lest he should betray his great agitation. "That woman may have important information. I can capture her in a few minutes. Then we will run those wolves down."

Without awaiting the reply, Dashing Ned gave his horse free rein and sped after the spotted mustang, who was bearing its mistress swiftly toward the morning sun. One backward glance the fugitive cast, then devoted her every energy and art to maintain her vantage-ground. And right nobly the little mustang rewarded her efforts. Swift and hardy, it scarce seemed to feel the burden it bore, but brushed the dewdrops from the bending blades of grass with the long, low leaps of a hard-pressed antelope.

Dashing Ned used his spurs freely, but his horse had been ridden long and hard, and there was not its wonted elasticity in its movements. A half-curse, half-groan parted the Ranger's lips as he saw that the paint-mustang was fairly holding its own.

His brain was in a wild confusion. He could scarce believe his eyes. And once he pinched his arm until the blood flowed, to convince himself that he was not dreaming.

A cold perspiration started from every pore as he saw that the spotted mustang was slowly

but surely leaving him behind. He drew a pistol and half-leveled it, thinking to shoot the horse, but dared not trust his mustang's nerves. And then, at such speed, a fall from the saddle might well prove fatal to the woman.

The chase had covered full two miles, when the fugitive turned her mustang toward the southern timber. Dashing Ned took instant advantage of the angle, gaining several rods by the change. Straight on dashed Missouri Belle; but instead of entering the timber, she drew rein beneath a low spreading live-oak tree and coolly faced her pursuer.

"Good-morning, Captain Conway! You appear to be in a hurry."

Dashing Ned wrenched up his horse, confused and abashed at this cool salutation. There was no look of terror now in those lustrous eyes, and the fair skin was only softly suffused, while a pleasant smile played around the red-ripe mouth.

"Isola, what does this mean? why are you here?" he faltered, coming closer.

"Is not the prairie free for me as you, Captain Conway? Though from the manner in which you and your rough bears hunted me, I could almost doubt the fact. Do you always take a joke so seriously? Or did you mistake me for the Chaparral Wolf?"

"What could we think? That man and his murderous gang had but a few minutes before passed over that very trail. I cannot understand how you escaped meeting them. I can't make out how you came here; it is all a puzzle!"

"There are many enigmas in this world, and I am one of them. You have never understood me, from the very first. You believed me everything but what I was—and am, God help me! Had you only known—! Bah! what matter? It is all in a lifetime." And the young woman laughed; but there was far more of bitterness than merriment in the peal.

"I believed you all that was pure and good; I believe so still. I will always believe so. I loved you the first time we met, and that love has grown stronger and firmer every day and every hour since. You can say nothing that can alter that love, Isola, let the mystery which surrounds you, take its birth from what it will. I only ask—"

"Ask nothing, Edward, for I have nothing to give you. I have been false to you from the first. I had a part given me to play, and I played it, caring little how you might suffer from it. Stop! something is urging me to tell the whole truth now, and I must obey. You must listen to me; I ask it by the love you swore to me."

"I will listen, Isola," said Conway, quietly. "But if you are testing the truth of my love, you are simply wasting time."

"No more! you are heaping coals of fire upon my head! Be still—let me say my say while I can command myself! I said that I had played you false from our first meeting, and I meant it. I did not like the part, but I was acting under orders from one whom I could not disobey. You remember, you rescued me from two ruffians in San Antonio, one night. I was playing a part, then. That was a farce, by which I was to make your acquaintance and excite your interest at the same time. I told you I was Spanish. That my mother was dead, my father an invalid. I allowed you to accompany me home. You called again and again. You learned to love me—or what you believed me to be; and I—"

"Stop, Isola!" cried Dashing Ned, appealingly. "Don't say that—don't say you were playing a part, then!"

"I must," responded the young woman, averting her head. "I lied when I said that your love was returned."

"But why? if you did not love me, why did you lead me on to hope for such happiness? Or since you did, why not let me dream on? Why awaken me now?"

"Because I have grown sick of such constant deceit. No—I will be perfectly truthful with you now. That was not the whole reason. Since then—I have learned what it is to love. I can realize now the wrong I did you, and as the only amends I can make, I open your eyes to the truth. You do not ask *who* I love, and I thank you. It would pain me to refuse you anything more, and I could not tell you his name."

"I can guess, Isola. I have not forgotten that night at the Golden Harvest. You were masked, but I knew your voice too thoroughly to mistake."

"You knew—and you treated me as a stranger?"

"Was it so strange? I loved you; and so I trusted you. I felt sure that you would explain all in good time."

"Edward Conway, you are fortunate! Had I known you as well before—but never mind. The past is past."

"But may it not be recalled, Isola? You have known this Mark Bird but a few days. He can never love you as ardently as I. Give me another chance. I can—I will win your love, if I only have—"

"No, Edward; there is still another bar. I may love, but that is all. I could never disgrace an honest man by wedding him. I—the outlaw's daughter!"

"Isola!"

"Yes; I am the daughter of the man whom you call the Chaparral Wolf. It was to get at the secret of your plans against him that I made your acquaintance. Now go—but remember that I am not wholly to blame. I never knew a mother's care; and father—you can guess what his training was."

"Isola, I love you, even as *his* child. Marry me, and I will take you far away from this country—"

"I cannot desert my father," was the low, firm reply.

"Then I will disband my men and join him. You are all the world to me. I cannot give you up, Isola."

"You would do this—you!" faltered the girl.

"And gladly—so that I have *you*! I will—"

"No, you must not. I am not worthy. And then—I love him. You must try and forget me. There are others—"

The sounds of heavy firing came to their ears from a distance. Dashing Ned started like one awaking from a dream. He felt that his men had been drawn into an ambush!

CHAPTER XXI.

DOUBLE DAN IN BUSINESS.

In those first moments Double Dan was filled with a hatred as bloodthirsty and fierce as it was short lived. He considered Colonel Overton as his own game, and looked upon the interference of the wayside assassin as a personal injury to himself. Thus, when he uttered his yell and leaped forward, weapon in hand, the fallen man's nearest friend could not have been more thoroughly resolved to avenge his assassination than was the man who had for days been weaving a halter for his neck.

The assassin fled at full speed, and seemed winged by fear, but there was one upon his track whose muscles of steel had more than once worn out stanch horses. Foot by foot the assassin was overhauled. A dozen times had Double Dan raised his revolver to end the chase by a shot, but as often had he hesitated. He knew not who might be lurking within ear-shot.

"They's more'n one way o' killin' a cat!" he muttered, as he shifted his grasp from the butt to the barrel of his heavy revolver, then hurled the weapon full at the flying figure with all the force of his sinewy arm.

Stricken fairly between the shoulders the fellow plunged heavily forward upon his head, and the next moment Double Dan alighted upon his back, both hands closing like a vise upon his throat.

There was little danger of resistance, as Double Dan was not slow to perceive. What with the blow, the solid fall upon his head, and the brief choking, the assassin was senseless, two-thirds dead. When convinced of this, Double Dan slipped off from the body, turning it over so that the face became visible. This wore a mask of blood and dirt, which the spy lost no time in wiping away, using a handful of grass. Then, stooping low over the body, Double Dan struck a match and held it close to the face.

"Waal, I ber-durned!" he ejaculated, starting back in genuine amazement. "Ef that don't git me! who'd 'a' thunk it! the p'izen cuss!"

Fairly overcome by the discovery he had made, Double Dan drew back, scratching his head as though in a quandary. This, however, did not last long. There was too much upon his hands for him to waste any time.

He bent over the body once more, this time to make sure that, though alive, his prize would not be liable to recover his senses too soon. Satisfied with his examination, Double Dan arose and trotted rapidly along the back trail until he reached the spot where Colonel Overton had fallen. His horse was gone, but the half-breed still lay as he had dropped from the saddle. The starlight was strong enough for Double Dan to distinguish the blood that flowed over the half-breed's face, and at first glance he believed Overton had been shot through the brain, but a hasty examination proved otherwise. Though the will of the assassin had been good, his aim had failed, either from nervousness or some movement of his intended victim, and the ball had merely tore its way through the half-breed's scalp, above his temple.

Double Dan chuckled grimly as he discovered this. Though he hated Overton with all his heart, he would have grieved deeply at his death—provided another hand than his own dealt the blow.

For the second time Double Dan squatted down beside a senseless body, and vigorously scratched his bullet-head. Business was rushing. His hands were so full that he hardly knew which way to turn first. More than ever did he wish that he and his "twin-brother" were not such inseparable companions. If he could only be in two places at once—!

He ceased irritating his scalp, and a broad smile gradually filled out the wrinkles of his face. The problem was solved!

Springing to his feet Double Dan ran swiftly to the spot where he had left the would-be assassin, and hastened to carry out the peculiar scheme he had formed. Lighting a couple of matches he closely scrutinized his captive from head to foot. He grasped one of the large met-

al buttons with which the fellow's jacket was profusely studded, and tore it loose, together with a shred of cloth. He picked up the battered hat that lay near, and drew the long knife from its sheath. Bearing these in his hand he ran back to where Overton lay. The button he forced into the half-breed's clenched hand. The hat he placed beside him; the knife he dropped a few feet away.

"Ef that don't do the business, then I don't want a cent!" and his double voice squeaked and rumbled in high glee. "When he wakes up, fust thing he'll see them things. He'll know whose they was. He'll go fer to git squar', an' right thar's whar I'll pick up the trail ag'in. Good Lawd! ef any p'izen critter picks up Double Dan fer a fool, he's goin' to git left, sure!"

Picking up Overton's hat, Double Dan hastened back to his other charge, eager to finish that part of the job. He pulled the hat firmly upon the man's head, then closely searched his pockets. In one of these he found the well-filled pocket-book so recently taken from Overton, together with several papers which had evidently come from the same source. Assuring himself that the money was within, Double Dan thrust all into his breast.

"Now ef the p'izen critter'd only git up an' mosey home, I'd be all right. It'd spile all ef Turn-over was to wake up fust an' find him here."

Double Dan drew a small flask from his pocket and shook it regretfully. Evidently he deemed it a shame to waste good liquor on such an evil subject. And such a course had its drawbacks, besides.

"He ain't quite a fool. He'd want to know whar the lickin' come from. Good Lawd! the very thing! He'll be too bad skeered to think o' lookin' fer Turn-over; I'll do it!"

Double Dan, nearly choking with merriment, poured a quantity of powder into the hollow of his hand and proceeded to make a "spit-ball" about the size of an egg. Into this he inserted a bit of punk, placing the whole in the right hand of the senseless assassin. Striking a match he ignited the punk, then hastily withdrew a few yards, lying down in the tall grass.

He was not kept long in suspense. The dampened powder caught fire and began spitting and sputtering at a great rate. The assassin stirred uneasily as the fire began to scorch him, and as the dryer powder inside the ball exploded with a vivid light, he sprung erect with a yell of mingled pain and terror. As Double Dan had foreseen, he was too greatly confused to realize what had occurred, but, guided by instinct, he took to his heels in blind terror, running away from he knew not what.

"Ef I ain't too p'izen smart to live!" gasped Double Dan, almost suffocated with laughter. "Chain-lightnin' couldn't faze that critter! I reckon he thought he'd woke up in brimstone-land, sure enough!"

But Double Dan's work was not yet finished. He drew his belt a notch tighter, and with one keen glance at the pole-star, started in a swift, steady run across the prairie. Despite the long distance he had already traveled upon foot since eating or sleeping, the scout ran as fresh and strongly as though fatigue was unknown to him. For hour after hour he maintained his pace, never faltering, not once pausing for breath. The man was one mass of tireless muscle. He had never met his equal, and to this day the curious can gather stories of his marvelous fleetness of foot and matchless endurance, among the old stagers of the Southwest. Double Dan is no fancy sketch.

The night was far spent when Double Dan's race was ended. He entered a dense clump of timber and undergrowth, pausing near its center, to utter a peculiar, long-drawn and quavering whistle. He listened for a reply, but none came. Twice he repeated the signal, then, with an exclamation of disgust, he advanced to what appeared to be a pile of brush and vines. Pulling a portion of the latter aside, he opened a small, stout door and entered a low, cunningly-concealed cabin. Striking a match he peered around him. The cabin bore traces of recent occupation. The light faded and Double Dan stood thinking. His disappointment was great. It was important that he should meet the owner of this secret cabin, yet he had scant time to lose.

"Mebbe he'll be in time, yit," he muttered. "I'll lay down an' ketch a couple or two winks on the chaine."

Curling up in a pile of dried grass and leaves, Double Dan fell asleep almost immediately. He possessed the rare faculty of awaking at just the minute he had determined upon beforehand, nor was this case an exception. Day was just dawning when he awoke. He was still alone. He cautiously stepped outside and whistled, but, as before, without any response. Re-entering the cabin, he took down a bit of jerked meat from a store that hung from the rafters and began eating.

"Ef I could only write!" he muttered, anxiously.

But Double Dan was not one long to despair. As usual a happy thought came to his aid. Grinning with delight he took down a buck-skin shirt that hung upon the wall, and spread it out

before him. Then, laying in a stock of cinders from the rude fireplace, he began painting his report.

First he drew what was intended for a man, but in a miraculously distorted position. Just above this was drawn a bird's head, with a snake in its mouth. To the right was a smaller figure with big eyes, a wonderful head of hair, and flowing skirts.

With his head upon one side, Double Dan eyed his work with complacent approval.

"It's clear as mud, ef I do say it! A blind man could see that that pizen critter is turnin' a summerset, an' thar's Turn-over's totem!"

He paused abruptly and raised his eyes. The door was pushed partly open, and a man's head entered. It was the face and head of Colonel Overton, the half-breed!

CHAPTER XXII.

"TURN-OVER, THE HALF-BREED."

THERE were few names better known throughout Texas than that of Colonel Overton, taking it through its various changes. His fame—or notoriety—was common to the whole vast region west of the Mississippi river. A hundred men had sworn his death at as many different times, and as many attempts had been made to keep these oaths. But Satan seemed to befriend his own, and at the date of this story the border scourge was still alive and pursuing his career of crime and cruelty. His name and some of his deeds have found a place in a dozen or more books of Western travel, but as yet no perfect record of his life has been given. Partly as a curiosity of reckless daring and crime, partly because he has played a prominent part in this hasty record, I have collected the main points of his eventful career, and transcribed them here, simply premising that what follows is history, and can be substantiated, if necessary.

About the year 1815, a Spanish or Mexican trader settled among the Kiowas, at the foot of the Green Mountains. He took a squaw from his adopted tribe, and by her had one child, the subject of this sketch. Not satisfied with the legitimate profits of his profession, this trader—whose name is lost—indulged largely in horse-stealing and even less harmless pursuits, more than once leading a foray into the settlements of the province of Santa Fe; and it was during one of these raids that he was captured and hung. The Kiowas took possession of his property, which was considerable, but, from some cause now unknown, drove away his squaw and child. Two or three years later she turned up as the squaw of a Canadian voyageur, named Baptiste Lajoie. The young half-breed grew up stout and of a noble presence; but the black drop was in his heart. He became an adept in the use of weapons and trappers' implements, and, young as he was, was known far and wide for his strength, activity and skill in every athletic sport, as well as for his remarkable proficiency in prairie lore.

Lajoie, during one of his trapping expeditions, found a rich placer of gold, and in an unlucky hour resolved to take his adopted son with him to St. Louis to taste of the pleasures and dissipation of civilized life. The youth seemed overjoyed, and eagerly drank in the trapper's florid descriptions; and with them came a dark, deadly resolve, which was afterward carried out. Baptiste Lajoie never reached St. Louis, but his adopted son did, and that son was loaded down with gold.

For a few weeks the half-breed drank his fill of low, brutish dissipation; but then a curious freak took possession of his mind. He resolved to play the part of a gentleman; and to do this properly, he resolved to go to school! Representing himself as the son of a Cuban planter, he entered a private school, and evincing a wonderful aptitude for learning, soon caught up with and passed his companions. During all this time—nearly two years—his conduct in and out of hours would have borne the closest scrutiny. He was a model of uprightness and propriety.

Having finished his course of training, the half-breed made his debut in society as the only son and heir of a Spanish grandee. Darkly, grandly handsome, he played his part well, and was the lion of the year. He became the leader of a certain fast set, and easily kept his purse well supplied, thanks to his skill in manipulating cards and dice. He won the heart of a wealthy young lady, and the wedding day was set. But on that day the "Spanish Don" was a fugitive from justice. He had been detected in cheating at cards, and when accused, buried his knife in the unfortunate man's heart. The friends of the murdered man attempted his arrest, but with knife and pistol he foiled them, leaping through the second-story window, leaving three dead men behind him. Strange to say, he escaped without a scratch, and though he was hunted hotly by the officers of justice, he gave them the slip and took to the plains to avoid punishment.

From that day on, his career was one of unblushing treachery and crime. Tired of civilized life, he bought a stock of "notions" and set up as an Indian trader. Again wearying of this, he lived an indolent life with the Indians,

tolerated by them because of his services as an interpreter during their barterings with the whites. But he changed from tribe to tribe so often that the traders dubbed him "Turn-over," which, by a natural transition, became Overturn, then Overton; he himself added the title of colonel, when the English Fur Company, from Canada, employed him as their agent at high wages. Here again Turn-over played a double part, cheating both his employers and the Indians with whom he traded, clearing a large fortune before his double-dealing was found out. He made many bitter enemies among the Indians whom he had defrauded, and many attempts were made on his life. One and all of these were foiled. Upon three of these occasions he killed his attempted assassin, and to guard against the fury and vengeance of their kindred, he was forced to enlist and maintain a strong band of men who accompanied him everywhere.

When Turn-over was discharged and superseded by the Fur Company, he made off with his spoils, and tired of the never-ceasing vigilance necessary to guard against death, he left the plains for New Orleans, where he soon became celebrated as Colonel Overton.

His career here was an exaggerated repetition of his life in St. Louis, but he was more careful to keep without the clutches of the law. He paid court to the heiress of one of the richest estates in Louisiana, and married her within the year. Possessed now of almost unlimited wealth, Overton displayed a boundless extravagance that made his name a wonder throughout the entire land, and he and his beautiful bride became one of the principal attractions of the Crescent City.

Three months later he was seen and recognized by a cousin of the man whom he had slain at the card-table in St. Louis, and promptly arrested. While lying in prison awaiting a requisition from the Governor of Missouri, Overton once more escaped his merited doom. The relatives of his wife were very proud and felt the impending disgrace keenly. Satisfied that, if taken to St. Louis, Overton would most assuredly be found guilty—for he freely confessed to them that the charge was true—they lavished their gold with an unsparing hand, and bribing the officials, succeeded in getting Overton clear of the prison walls. But this did not content them. While he lived, disgrace would stare them in the face at every turn. Better that he should die; and so it was decided.

Overton was placed in a boat, and told that a vessel was waiting for him, in which he was to seek safety on the Continent until the storm blew over. The night was dark and stormy when the little skiff left the wharf, pulled by the father and brother of the young wife. Overton suspected nothing, until the brother dropped his oar and shot him through the breast. Then he made a desperate struggle for life, but the odds were too great, unarmed he was. Three times was he shot, and stabbed as often; then the boat was upset by the furious struggle, and all three were precipitated into the angry waters. Overton managed to regain the overturned skiff, and lashed himself fast, then he swooned away.

It was a week later when he returned to life. He had drifted far from land in the furious gale, and was picked up by a Spanish trader bound for Galveston. He was landed at that port and left at a sailors' lodging-house, without a cent of money. When he recovered sufficiently, he paid his host by tending bar, until he was out of debt. While thus engaged he formed the acquaintance of several professed traders with the Mexicans, and had little difficulty in gaining their confidence.

He had a run of luck at the gaming-tables, and joined the traders as an equal partner. With a train of goods they started for Chihuahua. Disposing of their goods, the company appeared in their real colors; as land pirates. They captured two silver convoys, and committed so many atrocities that the country soon became too hot for them. By mutual agreement they disbanded and divided their spoils. Each one was to seek safety in his own way. Overton's course was a characteristic one. Hiding his plunder he sought out the chief of the forces sent out against them, and offered to surrender his comrades on condition that he was pardoned his offenses. This treacherous proposal was promptly accepted. Overton faithfully carried out his part of the programme, and after complacently witnessing the death by the garrote of his late comrades, in Mexico, he carried his plunder to Texas. Heading for Santa Fe, he fell in with a company of traders with whom he had had dealings in the past. Drinking freely, he told his story without any reservation. That night the traders robbed him of horse, mules, plunder and all, leaving him naked and weaponless upon the prairie, as they believed, dead.

But fate had a still more horrible death in store for him. He recovered his senses, and for three days crawled over the prairie upon his hands and knees, his only food being grass and such insects and reptiles as he could catch. At the end of that time he was found by a party of Indians, who nursed him back to life. He repaid them by running off their stock in the night!

CHAPTER XXIII.

A CORDON OF FIRE.

THE favoring breeze bore to their ears the sounds that told so much, and, startled, the outlaw's daughter and the Ranger captain for almost the first time since their peculiar interview began, looked each other squarely in the face. Missouri Belle's face flushed scarlet, then faded to an ashy paleness, but her clear eyes never faltered nor changed expression.

"Your friends and my friends are fighting," she said, in a rapid, decisive tone. "I can see what your suspicions are. You believe that I decoyed you hither so that your men might prove an easier prey. Let it go at that. It will make it all the easier for you to forget that such a person ever lived as I. Go! your men are hard pressed; they need your strong arm. Go, Edward Conway; and God's blessing go with you!"

There was an intense earnestness in her voice that thrilled through Dashing Ned's every fiber, and half mad with strongly conflicting passions, he started forward with outstretched arms as though to clasp the blessing to his heart. But Missouri Belle drew back with an imperious gesture.

"No—the past is dead. If ever we meet again, it must be as strangers. Go! your men need you. I charge you by the love you once bore me, not to attempt to follow me. That would only bring sorrow to us both. Go! and pray Heaven that we may never meet again!"

As she spoke, Missouri Belle touched her mustang sharply with the spur, and plunged into the timber. Dashing Ned started as in pursuit, but at the second leap he reined in his horse. Once more the fresh breeze bore to his ears the reports of firearms, and this sound recalled him to a sense of his duty. With an impatient gesture he brushed one hand across his eyes as though to banish the weird spell that had bound him, then turned his horse and thundered down toward the spot from whence the reports of firearms proceeded.

As already stated, when Dashing Ned started in pursuit of the girl whom he had known only as Isola Alvarez, he left his men in charge of his lieutenant, John Sullivan. A stouter-hearted, braver man never lived than this same "Bulldog Jack." He never knew the meaning of the word fear, as applied to himself. Like the animal after whom he was named, when Sullivan closed with an enemy, it was a death-grapple. But this blind ferocity was his sole qualification for command. It rendered him a favorite with the hard-fighting Texans, but on this occasion, at least, it was the cause of a severe misfortune, to say no more.

Their fiercest passions aroused by the loss of several good men, and by the taste of blood the flying skirmish had given them, the Rangers watched the chase with anything but pleasant sensations. They knew that this delay was unwise; that it might be the means of defeating the purpose to which they had devoted several months of arduous work. With every moment the Chaparral Wolf and his men were improving their advantage. It was hard, this enforced idleness, when one bold stroke might insure them the longed-for triumph.

Among those who chafed most was Fred Meyer, the scout. He, like many another then present, had good cause for hating the Wolves. Less than one month previous, his younger brother, a fine, open-hearted lad, had been found hanging from a tree, dead. From the "sign" around, there was little doubt as to who were his murderers. And beside the corpse, Fred Meyer swore a solemn oath to never know rest until he had exacted a heavy price for that young life.

For a few minutes he chafed in silence, but then, as he read the ill-disguised impatience of the lieutenant, he addressed Sullivan:

"The cap'n didn't say nothin' ag'in'st sending out scouts, lieutenant. They's no knowin' what them slippery imps may be up to. Better let me take a few o' the boys an' go on ahead. We kin blaze the trail so you won't lose any time when the boss comes back, but kin come up hot-foot."

Sullivan looked doubtingly at the scout. A good follower, he was no leader, and scarcely able to form a judgment of his own. Meyer knew this, and made the most of the knowledge. Taking the consent for granted, he added:

"I'll jest take hafe a dozen o' the boys, in case we run upon the imps, so we kin hold 'em outel you kin come up. We'll leave the trail plain enough for you. Ef the boss hadn't bin in sech a hurry, he'd told us to do jest this thing."

While he was speaking Meyer selected his men, nine in number, one of whom he chose to act as scout in conjunction with himself, and followed by the eight men, leading the two scouts' horses, the little party struck rapidly across the opening upon the trail of the Chaparral Wolves.

Though so ardent in the chase, Meyer was not a man to neglect all caution, and as they drew within gun-shot of the timber, he bade the horsemen draw rein, advancing with his brother scout to make sure that no ambush was placed to command the point where the trail en-

tered the dense undergrowth. The spot was a favorable one for such a purpose, and a few determined men could have inflicted a heavy loss upon any unsuspecting enemy.

With less caution than a perfectly cool scout would have displayed, Meyer assured himself that the timber was untenanted save by himself and his comrade. He had scarcely expected otherwise, as the spot was too favorable for an ambush, not to be looked upon with suspicion by a pursuer, and he also felt that Equality Eph was shrewd enough to know this as well as he.

"He knowed we'd not pass by without fust takin' a scout, an' he putt in his best licks to gain ground," muttered Meyer, disgustedly, as he returned to the edge of the opening and signaled his men to advance. "'Tain't no ways likely he's goin' to stop this side o' the hole he's aimin' fer. He'll count on our s'archin' the bresh closely; an', wuss luck! we've got to do it, too!"

The case was one that would have provoked a less interested person than Meyer. If he were to proceed according to the rules of good scouting, by first feeling the ground before passing over it, there was the risk of losing their game altogether by being outpaced. On the contrary, by pressing ahead without due regard to prudence, there was the probability of running into an ambush, when their over-haste might well prove fatal.

Thus buffeted first by his longing for revenge, then by his experience as a scout, Meyer eventually lost his head and followed a medium course; too fast for a thorough feeling of the trail, too slow for the purpose of overtaking the enemy supposing they had pressed forward without any delay.

The trail was narrow and winding. But a single horseman or two footmen could pass comfortably at a time. Meyer led the way, the other Rangers being strung out in a long line. At a point where the trail made a sudden bend to the east and passed through a miniature glade a dozen yards in diameter, the trap was sprung upon them.

Good judgment had been displayed in selecting the point for, as well as in forming the ambushade. The trail led through the little glade, where the soil was such that a single straggling footprint would have been instantly detected. But Equality Eph had pressed on past this spot, sending his men into the bushes several rods further on, with orders to cautiously fall back and surround the little glade.

Fred Meyer and his brother scout were permitted to pass by, in order to bring the greatest possible number of men into the toils. Then the signal was given. A dozen rifles covered the five men whose line filled the little glade, and at the word a deadly volley was discharged that laid men and horses dead upon the blood-stained ground. Then with wild, triumphant yells the Wolves broke cover, hoping to carry all before them by one decisive effort.

In that terrible moment, when one-half of their number were dead, and the underbrush seemed fairly alive with their relentless foemen, the surviving Rangers nobly sustained their well-won reputation of hard fighters. There was never a thought of flight. With knife and pistol they met the onset, too closely pressed to use their rifles. With the roar of an angry bull, Meyer turned and blindly charged upon his enemies. One minute later he lay dead beside his comrades; but not unavenged. He had sent three Wolves before him.

It would be hard to say which party had been the most astonished. The outlaws found they had sprung their cunning trap, not upon the entire body, but upon the advance guard, as they supposed. And knowing that the other Rangers could not be far behind, knowing too that a second surprise would be impossible, they hastened from the spot, each in his own way, not daring to encounter the Rangers on anything like equal terms.

Lieutenant Sullivan heard the firing and at once dashed to the rescue, reaching the scene of death in less than five minutes later. Just as they entered the glade, one of the outlaws, who had been left for dead, had recovered sufficiently to hobble away; but he was seen just as he entered the bushes, and a score of rifle-balls were sent after him.

This was the second firing which Dashing Ned heard, the moment after Missouri Belle continued her flight.

Half an hour's hard riding brought him to the scene of death. The dead alone occupied the little glade. And as Dashing Ned gazed upon the mutilated bodies, he felt that only for his insane love, these men might not have died.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BLACK SWAMP REFUGE.

ON leaving Dashing Ned, the outlaw's daughter rode hard and long, not as though she feared pursuit, but with the air of one who sought to ride away from her own disagreeable thoughts.

It was as she had confessed. Her acquaintance with the young captain of Rangers had been planned with an eye to one end; the welfare of the band led by Equality Eph. The out-

law had one trusty friend in the company—he whom the reader has met as James Brown—but Dashing Ned was one who let his plans develop themselves rather than one of those who freely air their arrangements beforehand, and Brown was not always able to learn of an intended search in time to warn his real friends. To guard against this danger the outlaw chief called his child's beauty and address into play. Dashing Ned made an easier captive than was expected. His love was like his own heart, wide and unsuspicious, and Missouri Belle found little difficulty in extracting all his secrets. And the blind devotion of the handsome Ranger was beginning to undermine the defenses of her heart, when, on the day of the festival, as stated, she met Mark Bird for the first time, when the cousins saved her life; for the stripling dressed in Mexican clothes whom they rescued from the infuriated grizzly was none other than Missouri Belle. She it was that rode the gallant gray steed to victory, her own pet charger, that would obey no other voice or hand; and she it was who whispered the words in Mark Bird's ear that took him to the Golden Harvest that night, where she met him as the pink domino. She was powerless under the influence of a mighty love that seemed the work of magic. She could do nothing but follow its dictates, though love was not her only object in meeting Mark that night. What the other purpose was, the sequel will show.

It was late in the afternoon when Missouri Belle neared the spot where she expected to find her father. For nearly an hour she had been winding her way through wild and gloomy masses of timber. The ground was black and swampy; the undergrowth luxuriantly rank and difficult to traverse. Had one been unexpectedly set down in this spot, he would have believed himself in a Southern swamp near the coast, instead of in the heart of an upland country. A swamp it was, nevertheless; and Black Swamp had an evil name for many a mile around. There were wild and superstitious stories told of the strange and horrible animals and reptiles whose haunts were deep in those gloomy recesses. The Indians shunned the spot as bad medicine. A more secure refuge Equality Eph could not have found in Texas.

Yet he did not trust entirely to the popular fears and superstitions. As Missouri Belle slowly picked her way over the intricate trail by which alone the island refuge could be reached, as the outlaws believed, she was repeatedly challenged by watchful sentinels. The spotted pony half-waded, half-swam across the narrow channel, and the young woman found herself fairly within the "Den."

Giving her pony into charge of the first man she met, Missouri Belle instantly sought out her father. She found him lying down, pale and haggard. Only partially recovered from his accident, that day's work had told upon him severely.

"Here at last!" he exclaimed, querulously. "I thought you were never coming. I half-expected you had run away with that young thief, Dashing Ned!"

"I came as soon as I could, father," responded the girl, in a low, weary tone. "I played my part through. I led him away as I promised; but if it was all to do over again, I would rather die!"

Equality Eph eyed his daughter keenly, then laughed, sneeringly. Though he said nothing, there was that in his face that stung Belle sharply. Her eyes flashed angrily, but then she arose and left the brush hut without a word.

Weary though she was from her long and hard ride, she seemed unable to rest. As an outlaw was passing by, with a respectful bow, she checked him. In answer to her questions he gave her a terse report of all that had occurred. The ambushed men had not yet come in, though it was believed that their plan had succeeded. Yes, the three captives were safe; and he pointed out to her the two cabins in which they were confined.

Missouri Belle thanked him and started on. Her mind was busy, and not all on pleasant thoughts. Until now, despite the wild, precarious life she had led for as long as she could remember, she had scarcely known what unhappiness or sorrow meant. She had been allowed her own way in everything. The men almost worshiped her. Everything had given way to her pleasure. But now—and her fair brow clouded as she remembered the events of that morning's ride from the chaparral village, when, for a few minutes, the three captives were together.

With a sudden resolve she paused before one of the huts and demanded admittance of the man who stood before the door. If he hesitated it was but for a moment. The door swung open and Missouri Belle entered.

There was but one occupant, who arose as the outlaw's daughter entered. Without a word Belle advanced and placing her hands upon Minnie Lamb's shoulders, turned her around until the full light fell upon her face. The fair maiden would have shrunk back, but there was a wonderful power in those little brown hands, and though her face flushed hotly, she was forced to endure that long, keen inspection.

"You are indeed lovely, child," said Missouri Belle, as she at length released her captive; and there was a sober, almost stern shade upon her face as she spoke. "It is a face that some men would go crazy over. And yet, it is but a doll's face, when all is said. Look at me, child; look at me closely. You are lovely, as I said, but am I less so?"

Minnie shrunk back, but the brilliant black eyes held her gaze as a serpent charms the fluttering bird.

"I do not understand you—you frighten me!" she murmured.

Missouri Belle laughed, low and mockingly. This timidity pleased her. She had never learned that bold hearts are oftener caught in silken meshes than in chains of steel, finely wrought though the last may be.

"Poor little dove!" she uttered, more kindly. "Better for you were you not so tender. You would suffer less. I wish I could save you from that bad man."

"You can—you surely have the power! You look good and true. Take or send me back home, and I will bless and pray for you—"

"I would if I could, but I dare not interfere. It may not be so bad. Overton is a black-hearted wretch, but he cannot mean you any great harm. There—I can stop no longer. Do not despair; I will aid you if I can."

As though fearing to wait longer, Missouri Belle left the hut and slowly approached the second cabin. She cast a half-apprehensive glance toward the place where Equality Eph rested, then bade the guard admit her. In silence he obeyed, and the next moment she stood in the presence of Mark Bird and Kirke Howard. They were bound hand and foot, lying in an uncomfortable position. Belle sprang forward on the impulse of the moment and severed their bonds, bidding them arise.

"No," she said, in a tone of genuine regret. "I cannot give you further liberty, dearly as I would like. Were you to pass that door, you would be shot down without mercy. But at least you shall not suffer the degradation of bonds, while I can help it."

"You come like an angel of mercy, lady," said Kirke Howard, an unusual earnestness in his tones, that caused Mark to open his big eyes and utter a low whistle. "I am very grateful. I wish you could understand how much."

"No more—thanks," said Belle, with a haughty bow; then turning toward Mark: "And you, sir? not a word to say?"

"I repeat the words of my cousin, and heartily. But," and his voice grew more earnest, "I trust that the lady—Miss Lamb—has met with more courteous treatment?"

"What is she to you?" sharply demanded Belle. "Have you not troubles enough of your own without wasting sympathy on others?"

"The fact that she is a lady should be a sufficient excuse," quietly responded Mark.

"You have met her before. Your close attention this morning would be proof sufficient, even if I had not seen you dining with her, that day, at San Antonio. What do you know of her? what connection is there between you?"

"I only know that she is a lady, pure and sweet as an angel. It will not be my fault if I do not know her better in the future," coolly uttered Mark.

"You love her!" panted Missouri Belle.

"I do—and proud I am to own it!"

"You dare—you dare tell me this? Ah! I hate you—I hate her! I—"

Missouri Belle stamped her little foot in speechless rage, then turned and fled from the cabin, leaving the cousins amazed at her wild outburst. Nor would their wonder have been lessened could they have witnessed her further actions.

Passing swiftly through the little group of huts, the girl flung herself down at the edge of the water. Burying her face upon her arms she gave way to a passionate burst of tears, her whole frame quivering like a leaf with the violence of her emotions.

She lay thus until twilight deepened into night, then arose and proceeded toward her father's cabin. Just as she gained the entrance, a wild yell arose from within, and the door opened. A dark form sprang upon her, and lifting her from her feet, rushed toward the water. But the outlaws, alarmed, sprang up on every side. Drawing a knife he placed it against her bosom.

"Raise a weapon and she dies!" he cried. "Make way, there!"

CHAPTER XXV.

MONEY OR DEATH!

THROUGHOUT the night Colonel Overton lay where he had fallen beneath the assassin's bullet, like one dead.

His horse, recovered from its affright and tired of grazing, stood beside its strangely still master, now and then whimpering softly as it bent its head and touched the blood-stained face that stared blindly up to the paling stars. But despite appearances he was alive, and the cool morning breeze was rapidly restoring his consciousness. The light of reason shone in his eyes, and with a faint groan he grasped the

forelock of the faithful horse and with its assistance stood erect.

For a time all was a painful blank, and he stared around him with eyes that saw nothing. But the exertion of arising had reopened his wound, and as the warm blood trickled down his face and dropped upon his hand, one by one the events of the past night came back to him in swift succession, ending with that blinding sheet of flame and benumbing pain.

"I was shot—but by whom?" he muttered, clearing his eyes and looking around. "Who did it—and for what?"

The truth flashed upon him as he remembered the large sum of money he had received from Mr. Marvin. A hissing curse parted his lips as he thrust a hand into his bosom. The pocket-book was gone. Like magic his bodily strength and mental powers were restored. A dark, deadly shade crept over his face as he caught sight of the battered sombrero. He snatched it up. There was a small, silver image pinned to the front; the effigy of a saint.

"He wore one—but so do a thousand others," muttered Colonel Overton. "And yet—who else could have known that I had money? And he knew that I held his life in my hand. Terror will make a coward desperate—"

A bell-shaped golden button lay at his feet: a shred of blue broadcloth was attached. And, just beyond, the brass handle of a knife shone amid the grass. Brighter and more snake-like gleamed the half-breed's eyes. His heavy mustache curled and bristled until his white, wolfish teeth gleamed startlingly white.

He drew the hat over his head, around which he had wound his handkerchief. The knife he placed in his boot, the button in an inner pocket. He crouched low down and searched the ground foot by foot. He saw where the assassin had stood when he fired the treacherous shot. He saw where the short, heavy rifle had fallen in the grass, and closely scrutinized the weapon. It was unloaded; beyond this fact there was nothing to identify it with the attempted assassination.

"The dog was cool enough to rob me; then why did he leave so many and such damning proofs of his identity? I cannot understand it," muttered Overton, as he resumed his investigations.

He could tell that the assassin had fled at speed; and he saw that he had not been alone. In places the tracks were covered by a larger, broader footprint. He found the spot where the torn and trampled grass betokened a fierce struggle. He found the ends of two matches that had been ignited. He searched further and saw that two men had left the spot, each going at speed; but the trails led almost at right-angles.

For a full minute Overton stood in moody doubt. Which one of these men had taken his money? or had they divided their plunder?

"That will do!" he muttered, as he whistled to his horse. "I know where to find him, without picking up the trail. I can learn the truth from him; it will be the shortest way."

He sprang lightly into the saddle and galloped in a straight line for San Marcos. The discovery he had made and a burning lust for revenge restored his strength like magic, and he seemed none the worse for the past night.

He pressed his good horse on at full speed, nor drew rein until he dashed up to the door of the inn kept by Juan Tierra. A wizened, smoke-dried Mexican met him at the bar-room door, bowing and ducking like some outlandish automaton.

"Where is Juan Tierra?" demanded Overton, sternly.

"In bed, excellency," bowed the man-ape. "He is very ill. He nearly died last night. The holy father has just left him. Ah! if he should die! there would be one more saint in heaven!"

"May that sad day never come!" and Overton showed his pointed teeth. "But even were he dead and buried, I bring him news that would cheat the grave were it as deep as a well. For two days have I ridden, and my spur has never dried. Go tell Juan Tierra that—Stop! I will bear him the grand word myself. It is little enough reward for my terrible ride, to witness the good, noble, saint-like man's delight. You will show me to his bedside. And that we may not be dry and empty in our rejoicings, bring two bottles of your best brandy."

The man-monkey did not for a moment suspect the good faith of the pretended messenger, so adroitly did Overton play his part, and lost no time in procuring the liquor from his master's private store. Knocking off the neck of one bottle, Overton drank long and thirstily; then he handed the remainder to the waiter, saying:

"Drink your master's good health in that. Just tell me which is his room. I know the house well. There may some customers come in, and you should be at your post."

The man-monkey did as directed, and following his royal customer, pointed out the door of the chamber where Juan Tierra lay, then hastily retreated to finish the bottle of brandy.

Colonel Overton noiselessly opened the door and quickly stepped inside, a cocked pistol in his hand. But there was little need of such pre-

caution. The landlord lay upon a low cot, sleeping heavily. Overton closed and barred the door. Laying bottle and pistol upon the table, he turned over the clothes that Tierra had slipped off. He found that one button was missing from the jacket. In one corner of the room he found his own hat, the soft brim of which was bullet-pierced.

He folded the jacket lengthwise and suddenly clapped it over the mouth of the sleeper, at the same time straddling the cot, thus holding his victim beyond all possibility of making an alarm. The Mexican's eyes filled with an unutterable horror as he recognized that dark, handsome face, now glowing like that of a veritable fiend.

"Move but a muscle—dare to utter a word above your breath, Juan of the broken knife, and I will gag your jaws with your own black heart!" hissed the half-breed, and the demoniac light in his eyes told that this was no idle threat.

Holding the Mexican's own knife before his eyes, Colonel Overton removed the jacket, though he still retained his position astride of his prey. Reaching over he grasped the brandy bottle and clipped its head off with the back of his knife. Swallowing a portion of its contents, he forced the landlord to drink also.

"Now, Juan the Devil, let's to business. I suppose you can guess why I am here?"

The landlord slowly shook his head. Overton laughed softly. There was a deeper malignity in such a laugh than a dozen oaths could have conveyed.

"Listen. I will tell you. I was murdered, last night. There were two men concerned in it. They shot me here; because I had a good sum of money, I suppose. But they were bunglers, for only my scalp suffered, though I fell like one dead. They robbed me, these two men. I cannot afford to lose so much. You must help me to recover the money. I give you five minutes in which to do this. If you fail—then I shall kill you. See?"

"I know nothing—how should I?" faltered the trembling wretch, in a whisper.

"I did not tell you all. One of these murderers left his hat, his knife, his sombrero beside me. I have them here. Do you not recognize them?"

Again Tierra shook his head as Overton showed him the three articles. But he turned even more ghastly than before, and his terror-stricken features betrayed him.

"Bah! am I a fool? I followed your trail here. I have seen you wear this hat and knife. I matched this button and rag with your torn jacket. And there lies my hat, which you must have snatched up in mistake for your own; and in it is the mark of your bullet. Tell me where you have hidden the money—tell me who was your accomplice and where I can find him. Tell me this, or by the heavens above! I'll bury this knife to the hilt in your foul heart!"

"I did not, señor—he robbed me, too! He took the money. I do not know where he is. I never saw him—"

Overton laughed, sneeringly.

"I give you three minutes, by the watch. Confess everything, restore the money you robbed me of, or die."

Holding the open watch in one hand and the bared knife suspended before the landlord's eyes, Overton quietly told off the fast-fleeting seconds. There was a deadly determination written upon every feature, and Tierra knew that he was doomed. Unless—

All was still without. There was no hope of help from that quarter unsummoned, and the first attempt at outcry would bring down that threatening blade. But the jeweled butt of a knife glimmered in the half-breed's belt. If he could only reach it!

Inch by inch his hand stole down. He began to hope. But Overton closed his watch. The time was up!

Tierra made a desperate grasp at the knife, at the same time uttering a wild yell for help. Only one. The knife descended and buried its length in his heart!

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN ENEMY IN CAMP.

SWIFT and sure the half-breed struck, sending the sharp-pointed blade with all his force to its haft in the screaming wretch's bosom. There was no need to repeat the stroke. The heart of Juan Tierra was cleft in twain.

With the blood-dripping weapon clutched in his hand, Colonel Overton sprang to the floor, his head bent in listening. A single moment was enough. There were loud, excited voices, and the sounds of hurrying feet, rushing toward the room where he stood. The cry of the landlord for help had been heard and was being only too promptly answered.

This was more than Overton had counted upon. Such prompt action upon a startling surprise was foreign to the Mexican nature, as his experience went. He had anticipated no difficulty in leaving the inn, and ere the inmates realized the truth, he expected to be fairly clear of the town.

But the man-monkey was quite as fond of secrets as he was of liquor at another's expense, and scenting an advantage to himself, he had

made use of the same loophole through which Double Dan spied upon Overton. The excitement into which he was thrown by what he saw, can be imagined. For a few moments he was spellbound. Then, remembering that his wages were in arrears, he stole away to raise the alarm and rescue his paymaster.

To this fact was owing the surprise which met Overton as he flung open the door of the death-chamber. A dozen men filled the narrow passageway, all armed, a truly desperate prospect. Overton cast a glance across the room. The one window was substantially barred. To force an opening would take too long. There was only one course open to him; and that course he took without further hesitation.

The revolver in his left hand spoke twice in swift succession, followed by wild yells and great confusion among the retainers of the inn. Then, like a human catapult, the half-breed charged through the veil of blue smoke, plying a knife with one hand and pistol-butt with the other, adding to the wild uproar with a shrill Comanche war-whoop. The doughty servants fell before his rush like ten-pins before a skillful bowler, some wounded, some stricken senseless, but the majority from sheer fright and the shock of that impetuous rush.

A derisive cheer announced Overton's arrival at the door; the next moment he was seated upon his good steed, thundering down the narrow street with drawn revolvers ready to second his quick eye in case of need.

But few of the natives seemed afoot, and those who were contented themselves with a quiet stare and shrug of the shoulders. It was no new thing to see a drink-crazed man "playing circus" in San Marcos, and few of the inhabitants were patriotic enough to even attempt putting down such a nuisance.

Unmolested, Colonel Overton rode clear of the town, keeping his animal at speed until San Marcos faded from view. Then, subsiding into a quiet trot, he gave his mind over to deep thought.

The mystery of the past night troubled him sorely. He knew now that Juan Tierra had not kept the money for which he had attempted murder. Covetous though he was, the landlord loved life even more dearly, and would have tried to buy off his destroyer, had he the stolen money. And yet—why had he not betrayed who was his confederate? A faint suspicion of the truth—that he had been dogged by two persons, the second of whom had robbed the robber—dawned upon his mind, but Overton dismissed the notion as soon as conceived. It was too improbable.

"Well," he muttered, finally, arousing and touching up his horse, "there is no use grumbling over what can't be helped. There's more money where that came from, and I'll strike the old fellow for a bigger stake, that's all. Now for Equality Eph! The game would be but half-won if he fails to take the bait."

Colonel Overton did not spare his willing horse, but pressed on at top-speed for the rendezvous of the Chaparral Wolves, eager to arrange the final preliminaries to his diabolical plot. While keeping a close look-out against falling in with Dashing Ned's Rangers—whom he knew to be scouting somewhere in the vicinity—Overton never drew rein until he reached the dense chaparral, where, early that same morning, the wolves and mastiffs had tested their powers.

The torn and trampled ground, the pools of coagulated blood, together with more than one corpse, told Overton what had transpired. His face grew dark and anxious. What had been the result? He feared the worst, since it was easy to see that the fight had led steadily toward the outlaw village.

"If the girl is but safe!" he muttered. "Unless I keep faith with the Kiowa this time, my day in Texas is over. Whirlwind would keep his word. He would hunt me down like a wolf!"

A few minutes later he stood upon the edge of the clearing, gazing upon the blackened ruins of the outlaw village. The Rangers had not slighted their task. Not a pole nor a timber stood upright. All was desolation.

Colonel Overton stood in deep thought for a minute. Thoroughly acquainted with the resources of the Wolves, he knew that, unless too hard-pressed, they would make the best of their way to the Black Swamp.

"If not there, then the game is up!" he muttered, finally. "I'll try that. If I don't strike pay-dirt there, the sooner I levant, the better for my health!"

Striking into a side trail, Overton pressed on through the chaparral for several miles, finally dismounting in a secluded glade beside a small spring, for the purpose of giving his horse a much needed rest. Having nothing to eat, himself, Overton lay down for a short nap. An hour later he awoke, and mounting, set out for Black Swamp.

At the edge of this gloomy refuge he again paused. He knew that the Wolves, if indeed they had retreated hither, would be keeping unusually strict guard. As he was ignorant of the present pass-word, an attempt to pass the lines would be attended with no little danger.

He dismounted and concealed his horse in a

dense clump, proceeding cautiously along the intricate trail, on the close look-out for the first guard. All at once a low, indistinct chirping sound was heard, that any stranger might easily have mistaken for the twittering of a young bird. But Overton instantly paused and uttered a low whistle, adding:

"I'm a friend—Overton. I bring important news to the chief. Come out and give me the pass-word."

The guard seemed satisfied with this explanation, and possessed of the pass-word, Overton pressed on with renewed confidence, nor did he experience any further trouble in passing the sentinels.

Just before he reached the water-ditch, a tumult arose upon the island, and pressing forward, Overton witnessed a curious and thrilling scene.

Several small fires lit up the island quite distinctly. Outlined against this he saw a tall, dark figure, clasping the form of a woman to his breast, the firelight reflecting from the blade of a long knife which he held threateningly against her bosom. Beyond were gathered a score of outlaws, all armed, wildly excited, yet held in check by the cool determination of that single man.

"At the first motion the girl dies!" came the clear, commanding voice to Overton's ears. "Though I war not with women, my life is of more value to me than hers. I am about to retreat. If you are sensible and do not attempt to interfere, you shall have the girl as soon as I reach cover, safe and sound. If otherwise, you will only receive her dead body."

Overton recognized the bright dress of Missouri Belle, and in an instant his resolve was taken. Marking the point where the stranger would probably take to the water, he glided noiselessly along until he reached a point directly opposite. And none too soon. The stranger was just at the edge of the water, where the bank was steep and slippery. He was shifting his grasp upon the maiden with the evident intention of casting her from him as he sprang into the water.

Overton raised a revolver and with a quick, steady aim, fired. The stranger uttered a sharp cry and fell backward into the stagnant waters, bearing the half-senseless maiden with him.

Overton did not hesitate a moment, but plunged in to the rescue. The Wolves rushed forward with loud cries. They saw a fierce struggle going on in the water, and could faintly distinguish forms, but dared not use their pistols for fear of injuring friends rather than foe.

But their aid was not needed. A dark figure was seen swimming toward them, bearing the half-drowned girl upon his arm; and the voice of Overton was heard calling for assistance. This was eagerly afforded, and relieved of his burden, he easily climbed the steep bank, shaking the mud and water from his garments like some huge water-dog.

"Some of you fellows can go in and pull the man out, whoever he is. You'll find my knife between his ribs," quietly observed Overton, raising Missouri Belle in his arms once more. "One of you show me where the chief lodges. The girl needs prompt attention."

While a number of the outlaws plunged in after the body, others escorted the rescuer to Equality Eph's tent.

As they entered, the outlaw chief suddenly cried:

"Kill him! it is Double sight, the Death Shot!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A STRANGE STORY.

EQUALITY EPH started to his feet with a maniacal yell of fear and hatred as the little party entered his tent. He glared at Overton as though at some dread specter of the past. He staggered toward the wall where hung a revolver belt, but ere his trembling hand could clutch a weapon, his legs gave way and he sunk to the floor like one in a fit.

Overton laughed disagreeably as he lowered the senseless form of Missouri Belle to the cot-bed. By his orders one of the women was sent for, under whose ministrations the maiden speedily recovered her senses, but not before Overton had discovered an ugly flesh-cut upon the head of the Chaparral Wolf. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled slightly.

"That accounts for his mistake," he observed; but no sooner did the outlaw's eyes open to restored consciousness than the same look of horror filled them.

"Kill him!" he gasped, venomously, glaring at the half-breed. "It's the Death-Shot! Kill him, curse you!"

"Look closer, captain," quietly uttered Overton, bending over the outlaw. "Surely you recognize me—Overton—your friend and ally?" "I saw you plainly," persisted Equality Eph, shrinking back. "You came to my side as I was lying down. You called me by that old name. You struck at me with a knife—there was a paper upon the blade—"

Missouri Belle uttered a little cry, and, turning, the persons present saw that she held a long, slender knife in her hand; and upon

the blade was a square bit of paper bearing blood-red characters.

Overton laughed sharply as all eyes were turned, doubting, toward him.

"There has been some clever jugglery going on in our midst. But I am not ashamed of my part in it. Captain, listen. You say that I am the Death-Shot; that the Death-Shot visited you here, leaving you his card—"

"Yes. I tried to seize him, but he knocked me down with a pistol, and fled."

"Good enough! Now, Miss Belle, please give your version of the affair," smiled Overton.

The maiden complied in a few words.

"Once more, good! Now listen. I was coming to see you. I heard the alarm. I hastened to the water-ditch, and there I saw some one holding Miss Belle as a shield against the weapons of your men, captain. I watched my chance and shot him. He fell into the water, bearing Miss Belle in his arms. I immediately plunged in and succeeded in tearing her from his death-clutch. I swam ashore, nearly strangled. I came here—to be cursed instead of congratulated. But that does not matter. The fact that I saved Miss Belle from a very disagreeable and unromantic death is quite sufficient reward."

Equality Eph stared blankly at Overton while he was speaking, and when the half-breed paused, with a low bow to Missouri Belle, he glanced appealingly at the two outlaws who stood near.

Overton nodded to them, smilingly.

"What he says is gospel truth, boss," one of the fellows said. "I helped fer to pull him up the bank. The boys is s'archin' now for the karkidge o' the critter—"

"Then the dead has come to life!" groaned Equality Eph, covering his face with his hands.

"Hush!" hissed Overton, stooping low over him. "Would you publish your secrets through the camp? Contain yourself until I can clear the cabin."

This was easily effected. Missouri Belle, now fairly recovered from her perilous adventure, hastened away to change her dripping garments, and the two outlaws were dispatched to aid their fellows in the search for the body of the Death-Shot. Overton carefully closed the door, then drew near to the Chaparral Wolf.

"Now what do you mean by the dead having arisen?" he asked. "You can trust me, surely, by this time."

"You swear upon your soul that it was not you—that you did not threaten me with death—that you did not leave that dagger—"

"You need not take my word alone for it," impatiently interrupted Overton. "Any of your men can swear that I was not on the island, until after the man who visited you was shot. Rouse yourself, friend, or I'll begin to believe you are going crazy."

"That man was the perfect image of you—so much so that I addressed him as you," muttered the chief.

"Did you ever know a man who resembled me so closely? I mean, before this day?" persisted Overton.

"In everything but complexion—yes! You must have heard of him—seen him, too! Would to God that I never had!"

"You don't mean—"

"Ay! Isaac Howard, the man we both thought was dead and buried long years ago! You must remember; he was your exact size and build; even the features were strangely alike—only you are dark, while he was fair as morning."

"I never saw him but twice; and then only for a moment. But he is dead—surely!"

"So I would have sworn! He was in the house when we set it afire. He rushed to the door, all ablaze, and I shot him down with my own hand! His bones were found, and buried, together with those of his wife and children."

"I never learned the full particulars. You know I rode away with my braves immediately all was over. But I afterward heard a rumor that one of the children was unaccounted for. It was generally supposed that the fire destroyed its remains completely."

"And so I supposed for over a year. But the child was saved. Ben Tolin, one of my men, while looking for plunder in the burning house, stumbled over an infant. He had recently lost his wife and baby, and so the soft-hearted fool carried the child away, secretly, fearing that we would kill it to destroy every trace of our work. Some words that he let drop one day, when in liquor, put me on the trail, and I forced the truth from him. I saw the child, took a fancy to her, and since that day she has been brought up as my own child."

"Not Missouri Belle?" exclaimed Overton.

"Yes; Missouri Belle. She is really the daughter of Isaac Howard, though I have learned to love her almost as much as I formerly loved her mother."

"So! that was the reason you hated Howard?"

"Yes. We both loved the same woman; but he won her. That made a devil of me, I verily believe. I waylaid him one night, and we had it out. My foot slipped, and he left me for dead. He, fearing to be arrested for murder—"

for no person believed I could live—left the country. It was ten years before I struck his trail; then I found him here, in Texas. You know the rest. We butchered the whole family, as we thought, though three of the number must have escaped. Their oldest child, a boy, was away from home on a visit; Ben Tolin saved the youngest daughter; and to-night I have met Isaac Howard, face to face!"

"It does not seem possible! where has he kept himself through all these years? Why has he not sought out his son, of whom you spoke?"

"I feel that I am right, though there are many things I cannot account for. For two years, now, this Death-Shot has been haunting us. During that time, nearly every one of the men who accompanied me on that black night has been killed. And in every case there has been found, either on the body or close by, a card similar to that one: bearing a blood-red coffin, a crossed bullet, and that strange signature. To-night, for the first time, I saw his face. It was the very picture of yours; or that of Isaac Howard, with skin stained and hair dyed."

"Strange!" muttered Overton, thoughtfully. "Still, it may be a mere coincidence."

"No! he demanded his daughter—and he called me by my real name—a name that I have not borne for full five-and-twenty years. He swore that I should die by the death I designed for him!"

"You are safe from that, at least," and Overton laughed sharply. "My shot only wounded the fellow, but as we grappled beneath the waters, I drove my knife home—I felt the guard grate against his breast-bone! Ha!" he exclaimed, as the sound of excited voices came to their ears. "That tells the tale! The boys have found his body! Come! let's go and see the show. If the famous Death-Shot is indeed our old friend Isaac Howard, we can easily prove the fact. Come!"

Together they left the cabin and hastened across the island to where a fire had been kindled upon the bank above the spot where the mysterious Death-Shot had plunged into the black waters.

"What luck, boys?" cried Overton, addressing the dripping, mud-covered men who stood beside the fire. "Where is the body?"

"Gone!" was the sullen reply. "He must have had a friend in waiting. We found where a body had been dragged out through the mud, then carried to where a horse had stood hitched."

"Why are you here, then? Go search every foot of the snow. If he escapes, the Rangers will come down on us—"

"All are gone but us," muttered the man. "Some one must stay to guard the prisoners."

"Lead me back—I feel faint!" gasped Equality Eph. "He swore that he would kill me—"

"And your doom is sealed! Death—death by fire!" uttered a deep, solemn voice, coming from the black waters.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DIABOLICAL PLOT.

OVERTON wheeled, with a hissing oath, and drew a revolver, glaring fiercely at the two men who stood near. It needed but a glance to see that neither of these had uttered those threatening words. Astonishment and awe was written upon their every features. The words had evidently proceeded from the black waters of the swamp at their feet. But who could be lurking there? This was the question they asked themselves. And it was answered in a most startling manner.

From directly above their heads came a laugh, shrill, prolonged and taunting. As they stared upward, the strange sound appeared to recede, floating away toward the center of the island, ending in a weird, doleful wail.

Overton laughed, shortly.

"Some one is trying our nerves with his ventriloquial powers. I will give him one hundred dollars to step out and face me like a man!"

There was no answer to this defiance, and seeing that Equality Eph was nearly overcome with his injuries, added to his superstitious fears, Overton took his arm and led him back to the cabin. Producing a brandy-flask, he made the outlaw chief drink a strong potion, then said:

"While we are waiting for the men to bring in our good friend, the Death Shot, go on and tell me the rest of your story. There is more in this Howard business than you have told me. In return, I'll let you into a little job I have on hand; one that will pay big money."

The liquor Equality Eph had drank, was producing its desired effect. His nerves were growing steadier with every moment.

"I always intended you should have a share in it," he said, which, by the way, was a flat lie; only for his disappointment in failing to procure the papers from Kirke Howard, Overton would never have been taken into his confidence. "I was only waiting until matters settled into ship-shape."

"You remember that the oldest son of Isaac Howard was absent from home on that night. I intended putting him out of the way, too, I hated his father so bitterly. But while waiting

for the storm to blow over, the family he was staying with, left the country, and I lost sight of him until a year ago. I saw a piece in a paper about a large fortune that had fallen to one Kirke Howard, through a curious chain of incidents. I'll show you the account some time. Enough that the fortune was left to Isaac Howard and his heirs. Young Howard proved his identity, and as the only surviving child, the whole property fell to him. So it was supposed; but I knew better. I knew that I held possession of a co-heir. I could have presented her, and claimed a share, but I resolved to have the whole.

"My first move was to find out where Howard hung out, and then to write him a letter. I signed the name of David Woodson to it; for no particular reason, only you had been speaking of him that day. I bade him come to Texas, if he wished to clear up a dark mystery. He answered, and then I wrote immediately. I told him there was an error in the belief that his father was dead—"

"Then you knew of this all the time?"

"No; when I wrote that, I could have sworn that the bones of the man who was buried by the old ranch were those of Isaac Howard. I said that, simply because I thought it would prove the surest bait to draw him into my trap."

"I neglected nothing. I bade him bring with him all the papers by which he had proved his identity in the will case, that I might know he was indeed the son of Isaac Howard. I bade him await me at Galveston. I intended to set him on some trail that would insure his easy capture. I wanted his papers to show me how to get to work to prove Belle the real heiress. After I had pumped him dry, I meant to send him after his father. Then I would take Belle, together with the papers and sworn testimony to the effect that she was the child rescued from the Howard ranch by Ben Tolin, and put in her claim for the money."

"A good enough plan," said Overton, thoughtfully. "I only see one drawback. When Belle finds out that you are not her father—and that she is a great heiress—what's the odds she don't give you your walking papers?"

"I saw that, too," grinned Equality Eph. "I told you once that I loved her mother. The daughter is now quite as handsome, though dark, instead of fair complexioned. I am not so old, nor yet ill-looking, when I put on civilized togs. I intended to marry the girl first, then install her as the heiress. See?"

"I see. But you spoke as though the plan had failed. You have captured young Howard, what has gone wrong?"

"The papers. I can find them no place. He admits that he had them when he was brought into camp, but swears that they were stolen from him that very same night as he lay bound. I have searched everywhere, but in vain."

"I should think it could be managed without them," observed Overton, thoughtfully.

"I don't dare stand a close trial," candidly admitted Equality Eph. "There might be too much proof raked up. I have not lived the life of a saint."

"You have never given either of them any hint of their real relationship to each other?"

"Of course not."

"There is a way, then," and the half-breed laughed. "Marry them; force him to execute a will in her favor; then plant him, and marrying his widow, go and claim your reward."

Wicked and thoroughly heartless as he was, Equality Eph stared at the half-breed with an expression that was not far removed from disgust.

"That is what I would do in your place. However, if you don't like the plan, let it drop. You have both birds secure, and for such a prize you can afford to bide your time."

"I don't despair, as yet. But you spoke of a money job. What is it?"

"Not unlike yours, though on a smaller scale. But it has one advantage. There is little risk, and the money is sure. You have not forgotten old Jack Castor? The Kiowa killed him—not outright, but so that he died. I saved his scalp, and as part payment he set me on the trail of a good thing."

"A good many years ago, he ranged in Missouri. His last job was a big one. He robbed a rich farmer, and then fired the building to cover his work. Not only this, but he stole a little girl, intending to use it as a means of bleeding the father still more freely. He started to hide her, then returned to give the alarm, so the golden goose wouldn't be roasted. But it happened that two travelers were passing by, and noticing the flames, gave the alarm, saving the old folks and servants. Jack recognized one of them, and did not put in an appearance, for a good reason. That man knew enough to hang him twice over; and more, he possessed the will as well as the power."

"He struck out for parts unknown, taking the young one with him. But when he tried to put his plan into execution, he could not find the Marvins. They had left the country. He could find no trace of them, and at last gave it up as a bad job."

"It is a curious coincidence that I was one of those two men who saved the Marvins from

burning, and I had met them in Europe, not three years before Castor made me his heir. As I knew that the old folks were rich, I resolved to work the lead. By advertising freely, I succeeded in finding them. Then I made sure of the girl. I sent her here by Grizzly Paw—"

"Not Minnie Lamb!"

"The very girl, pard. I thought some of marrying her, but she had some little objections, and I concluded it wasn't worth while. Well, I got the parents out here. I have seen them, and received five thousand dollars on account. They're to pay ten thousand more, when I restore the girl to them. That will be a snug little sum apiece, if you care to join in."

"Let me know what I am to do, first," said the outlaw chief, dryly.

"Not much. We are to take the girl, tomorrow evening, to the Buffalo Hump. One of my men has orders to guide the Marvins there, but not to arrive before dusk. I mean to hand over the girl, receive the money, and when they are having a good time generally, you are to come forward and capture the lot. You can take them to some snug place—here, if you like; and then squeeze the old man well for ransom money. See?"

"And we'll divide even?"

"Share and share alike—yes," replied Overton.

"It will come in handy if I conclude to take Belle to the States for that fortune," muttered Equality Eph, thoughtfully.

"How much is that fortune?" asked the half-breed.

"A little less than a million; not much, though."

"Well worth a little risk and trouble! You won't try the plan I suggested? about marrying the two?"

"No. I'd do 'most anything else—"

"I have it!" and Overton laughed aloud.

"Just change the parties a little. Force Howard to marry Minnie—you can, if you try hard enough. That done, he must sign a deed, or make a will in her favor. Of course he'd have the good sense to die, soon after. Then you might marry the widow—or we could draw lots for the chance; the winner, of course, to divide with the other. It can be done—what say?"

"I'll do it!" cried Equality Eph, extending his hand.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DEATH SHOT AT WORK.

WHEN Double Dan was aroused from his picture-writing by the faint creaking of the brush-wattled door, and glanced up to behold that dark, handsome face peering in upon him, his first thought was he had been dogged by Colonel Overton, and he hastily snatched up a revolver. But a second look convinced him of his error. The man before him, though bearing a wonderful likeness to Colonel Overton in figure and feature, was in fact a far different personage; none other than the real owner of this hidden cabin, and the one for whose information Double Dan was so arduously ornamenting the buck-skin shirt in charcoal.

As soon as convinced of his error Double Dan dropped his weapon, and the two men clasped hands with an earnestness that spoke well for the strength of their friendship.

"I've bin waitin' fer ye perty nigh a month, pard," chuckled the spy, his double voice filling the little low room. "They's big news—big news, pard!"

"I have not been idle," smiled the new-comer. "I have added three more names to the record, and have given the Wolves something to think about. I led them a fine dance over the prairie, and dropped them by slipping into the hole we know of in the old barranca."

"You'll git salivated one o' these times, ef you don't be more keener," and Double Dan shook his bullet-head reprovingly.

"I gave Dashing Ned and the boys a benefit, too, last night. I played the fiery head on them, and it worked to a charm. I looked hideous enough to frighten myself, but the captain is true grit. He hunted me hard, and only for my night-glass, would have trapped me, sure! As it was, I led him to the Wolf's den, and gave him directions where to find the key."

"You showed 'em the way?" eagerly cried Double Dan.

"About the same. By this time they should be making things rather uncomfortable for Equality Eph and his gang of cutthroats."

"Whar is it? Good Lawd! spit it out, boss! I don't want to lose all the fun!"

"There's plenty of time. While I am eating, tell me what you were trying to mark on that shirt."

Double Dan seemed accustomed to obey this strange man, and, though he seemed sitting on nettles, he did not demur now. In as few words as possible he ran over the principal points of his dogging Colonel Overton. As he came to the plot of the half-breed in which Minnie Lamb, the Marvins and Whirlwind, the Kiowa chief, were to play such prominent parts, the man known as Death Shot grew strangely agitated. This excitement culminated when Double Dan handed him the papers of which he had dispossessed the Mexican, Juan Tierra.

Double Dan stared at him in open-mouthed astonishment. For an instant he feared that his friend and master was dying. But the Death Shot pushed away the proffered whisky-flask, smiling faintly.

"God bless you! you have brought me a double life, my friend—if what I read here is true—and it must be! He would never have made the notes unless there was truth in them—"

"Ef you mean Turn-over, boss, you'll come nigher to the mark ef you read anything he writ back'ards. He never told the truth in his life 'cept when he tried to tell a lie—fact!"

"This is his own private memorandum-book, Dan. And what is written here only goes to confirm what I already had reason to suspect. Up, man! there's hard and hot work before us. If you are not fresh enough to keep up with me, you must follow my trail. There's life—more than life at stake!"

"They's only one boss in this State as kin do my legs justice, boss; an' that's the critter you ride. But I'll bet ye the wuth of a week's drunk that I'll be 'ithin call o' you at t'other end o' the trail, ef it lasts a week."

The Death Shot made no reply, but leaving the cabin; uttered a shrill whistle. With a joyful neigh, a magnificent stallion, black as midnight, burst through the bushes and bent its proud head for the coveted caress. Its master produced a saddle and bridle from a hollow log hard by, and adjusting them, mounted and rode out of the timber island.

Double Dan kept close to his heels, a broad grin upon his monkey-like face. Instead of a disagreeable duty, he seemed to regard the promised long and hard race as a pleasant bit of sport.

"Better mount behind me," said the Death Shot, as he settled himself firmly in the saddle.

"M in too big a hurry," grinned Dan, throwing open his collar. "Ef ye can't keep up, jest squeal, an' I'll run easy, like."

Like an arrow fresh loosed from the bow the black horse darted away across the level plain. With his chest squared, his head thrown back, Double Dan followed, with an ease and untrained grace that would have filled the heart of a Jackson or a Hazael with envy. He had in no respect overrated his powers. Swift as the black horse raced, he could not shake off the human machine at his heels. And for mile after mile their relative positions never changed. At any moment, had he felt so inclined, Double Dan could have extended his hand and caught the straight-floating tail of the black racer.

And two hours later, when the Death Shot drew rein at the edge of the chaparral in which the Wolves' village had stood, Double Dan was beside him, grinning broadly as ever, and, though panting a little, seemingly good for another spurt as hard and long.

"They ain't much I'm good fer," he chuckled, "cept to skeer the babies, but ef anybody wants a two-legged boss to ketch chain-lightnin', jest send 'em to me, boss!"

"If all else fails, you can hire out as a telegraph. But come—we must find the Rangers. I'll want you to introduce me, as Dashing Ned might string me up as Colonel Overton. But remember, not a word as to who I really am. I'll clear up everything in my own time."

Entering the chaparral, they followed the broad trail left by the Rangers. Double Dan groaned in disgust as he marked the various evidences of the fight, and seemed to think himself sorely abused in that the Rangers did not wait for him to help them open the "circus."

An hour later they found the Rangers, not far from the spot where Fred Meyer and his fellows had been ambushed. The appearance of the Death Shot created quite a sensation, and his parting speech to Double Dan might well have come true, had not the spy sworn to his honesty.

Double Dan gave in his report, and then the Death Shot drew Dashing Ned aside. He assured him that he possessed the power to place the Wolves into his hands without a chance of failure, provided he would withdraw his men from the chaparral, as though he had given over the hunt in despair.

"I know where they are in hiding, but a regiment couldn't dislodge them, by force. If you draw off, I can lure them out of their hole. Double Dan can vouch for my sincerity. Do this, and I pledge you my word that in forty-eight hours you shall have Equality Eph and Colonel Overton captives, or look upon their dead bodies."

"I possess the power to force you to show me this retreat," said Dashing Ned, doubtfully.

"Pardon: to take me captive, possibly, but no more. In one word, will you accept my proposal?"

Dashing Ned eyed the stranger keenly. The Death Shot drew a white wig and false beard from his bosom.

"I wore these when I warned you of the plot to rob the bank at San Antonio. Did I deceive you then?"

"No; and I'll trust you now. You will find us at the Three Fingers when you require our service."

The Death Shot simply bowed his thanks, then drew Double Dan aside and whispered a few words in his ear, after which he mounted his horse and rode away.

Dashing Ned was forced to await the return of his scouts, who were still absent, seeking for the broken trail of the outlaws. While waiting, the main party kindled fires and prepared food, the first they had eaten that day.

The afternoon was half spent, when Double Dan, who was still eating, suddenly changed countenance. Clapping both hands to the pit of his stomach, he plunged into the bushes, from whence proceeded sundry agonized sounds not unlike *New York*, which convulsed the Rangers with laughter. And while they were laughing, Double Dan was stealing silently away with the Death Shot, chuckling inaudibly at the success of his ruse.

When at a safe distance, the Death Shot halted and rapidly explained his plans to Double Dan, together with the part he, Dan, was expected to play. Daring as he was, the programme nearly took away Dan's breath. However, he knew that it would be folly to expostulate.

Twilight found them close to the island refuge in Black Swamp. Death Shot crossed the ditch dry-shod by passing along an overhanging limb and dropping from its extremity.

In anxious suspense Double Dan awaited the result of the reckless adventure, and as he saw how many of the outlaws were restlessly stirring, he could scarcely hope that all would turn out well. And his fears were only too speedily confirmed. The wild yell of Equality Eph's terror rung out, and instantly the island was all alive. Double Dan saw his friend break cave, and creeping down close to the water's edge, he prepared his weapons for use. The Death Shot should not fall unavenged.

He saw the whole affair, and laughed aloud as his friend retreated with his living shield. Unfortunately Death Shot changed his course, and to aid him better, Double Dan was obliged to follow suit. Ere he could reach the right point, Overton fired his shot, and the bold adventurer fell into the water.

CHAPTER XXX.

A HEART OF FIRE.

THAT was fated to be an eventful night to Missouri Belle, and her adventure with the desperate Death Shot was but a beginning.

She hurried away from the chief's cabin and changed her clothes, also discarding her water-soaked pistols for another pair. She had no thought of sleep. The events of that day had been far too exciting for anything like repose.

As she stood in her doorway, she could just distinguish the two small cabins in which the prisoners were confined. With a shudder of strangely-mingled emotions she turned away, wandering aimlessly forward, not noticing whither she was going until the sound of a low, sneering laugh broke in upon her reverie. A resentful light sprang into her eyes as her head uplifted proudly. She heard her own name spoken, and in the tones of Colonel Overton, a man whom she loathed and detested, none the less that he had of late days assumed an almost lover-like demeanor whenever chance or his planning threw them together.

Missouri Belle's training had not been such as to prevent her playing the eavesdropper in case of necessity, and now, gliding noiselessly to the rear of the rude brush structure, she crouched down, an eager listener to the startling conversation between the two men.

Not a word nor a look did she miss. Pressing close to the chink she drank in their startling revelations with breathless interest. Nor did she stir when the outcry arose beside the water-ditch as the trail upon the further shore was found. The discovery she had made seemed to have stunned her. Could it be true? She felt that it was, in her heart of hearts!

Little suspecting this audience, Equality Eph and Overton returned to the cabin and resumed their conversation. And Missouri Belle listened to the whole of it, never stirring a limb until the two men clasped hands in ratification of their diabolical compact.

The maiden had heard enough. She arose and hastened to her cabin, sinking upon her low cot-bed and burying her face in her hands. Her brain was confused and whirling. She seemed living a dream. And yet she knew that she must think—think soberly and clearly.

She did not notice the noise outside that heralded the return of the outlaws who had been sent in quest of the man who had so boldly carried off the body of the Death Shot. It seemed as though she would lie there motionless until the dawning of the new day.

Her face was white and hard-set as she arose and tossed back her damp hair, and the steady glow in her dark eyes told of a fixed and unalterable resolution. She secreted a brace of revolvers about her person, then extinguished her light and left the little cabin.

The night was dark and almost starless, but there was light sufficient for her purpose. Straight for the prison of the cousins she walked, and accosting the man on guard duty, ordered him to open the door. Her demand was

made so authoritatively that the fellow never thought of denying her admission. The interior was dark, but that was exactly what Belle desired. The business she was upon did not admit of spectators.

"Gentlemen, are you awake?" she said, speaking distinctly.

Kirke Howard, recognizing her voice, promptly answered for himself and cousin. Guided by his voice, Belle moved forward and knelt beside them. In a low, barely audible tone she resumed:

"Forget what passed to-day, and believe that I am here as a friend, to serve and aid you. You are in great peril. It has just been decided that you are to die. If you will place your trust in me, and obey my directions, I promise to save your lives, and to give you freedom. Think quick. There is little time to spare. What is your answer?"

"It requires no consideration," quickly replied Kirke. "I trust you as I would my Savior."

"And you?" persisted the maiden, as Mark made no reply.

"Kirke and I go together," was the quiet response.

"Very good!" and as she spoke Missouri Belle carefully severed their bonds. "As you trust me, so will I trust you. Here are weapons. They are loaded carefully, and will not fail you in case of need. Now listen. There is a man on guard at the door. He must be silenced before you can escape. It is barely possible that he could be taken prisoner without giving the alarm, but the risk would be too great. He must be killed! You need have no scruples. His hands are red with innocent blood. In slaying him you are simply anticipating the hangman."

There was no reply to this. Missouri Belle seemed to divine the thoughts of the young men by intuition.

"Is it my fault that my life has been spent in such company? Until this night I believed these people were my equals—that I had been born of and among them. But now I know that my parents were murdered, that I was stolen from honest associations, a mere infant, to be reared among outcasts and criminals. Is it so strange, then, that I weigh their lives lightly? But so be it! If you are afraid of soiling your hands, I myself will clear the way—"

"No—that you shall not do," impulsively uttered Kirke. "Give me your knife and I will attend to him."

"Very well. You will stand close to the door, as I pass out. I will arrange it so that his back is turned toward you. But remember that the faintest outcry will be ruin, if not death to us all."

Kirke pressed her hand in silence. At her command he would have dared tenfold the danger. Cool and self-contained though his nature was, his whole heart had gone out toward this strange girl, and he felt that death would be a small payment for one look of love from those luminous eyes.

Missouri Belle tapped at the door, and as the unsuspicious sentinel opened it, she emerged. But a little exclamation parted her lips, and she pointed across the island, saying:

"Merciful heavens! what is that?"

The outlaw made no reply. A strong arm was flung around his neck, and a long knife sunk deep down in his heart. There was no need to repeat the stroke. Death was almost instantaneous.

"Drag him inside, close the door and follow me, one at a time," hurriedly whispered Missouri Belle.

The cousins obeyed in silence. The maiden led them around the edge of the island until nearly opposite the point where the crossing was usually made. She parted a dense clump of bushes and pushed forth a small dug-out. At a sign from her the cousins entered. She followed them, plying the paddle with the skill and silence of a veteran scout.

All around them was darkness the most intense. Eyesight was of little service, and she seemed to rely upon instinct, instead. Be that as it may, for several minutes she impelled the dug-out through the gloom in silence. Then there was a slight shock as the bow touched land.

"Step out and hold fast," she whispered. "The bottom is firm enough. There is no danger."

Once more it was Kirke who obeyed her.

She led them for some little distance through the close growing timbers, then paused.

"Before we go further, I have something to say," she uttered, in a low, husky voice. "Listen, and do not interrupt me. The task I have set myself is hard enough, without that. I was that young Mexican lad whom you saved from the bear. I was the mask that met you at the gambling house. I went there to obtain the papers you carried. I failed then, but I succeeded last night. I have the papers safely. I stole them to keep them from the hands of Equality Eph. If he had found them, you would not be alive now. He meant to kill you, then gain possession of the fortune by producing another heir."

"He could not. I am the only survivor—"

"Not so. Your father is alive. I heard them say so this very night. And more. You have a sister living—"

"There must be some mistake. Both of my sisters were burned long years ago," said Kirke, sadly.

"Let that pass, for the present. Can you guess why I saved your lives—why I took so much trouble for the men whom I believed to be strangers?"

"Because you are a woman, with a woman's heart."

"Yes—but not as you imagine. Oh! it is hard to utter—bah! I said I would, and so I will! Listen! To you, I am speaking, Mark Bird. I had seen you often before that day at San Antonio. Often, yet never without a strange interest. But that day opened my eyes, and I knew that I loved you—loved you with the whole power of my soul! I felt that I could die for one kind word from your lips. Then imagine what a torture it was to hear you speak as you did this afternoon! You love her—that doll-face? Could she have served you as I have? No! she would have fainted at the mere idea of running such risk. Mark—I love you! I cannot live without your love! Do not scorn me—I am a woman, though I speak so boldly. I love you—I love you!"

"Can you not speak, Mark?" hoarsely demanded Kirke, a sickening pain gripping his heart. "Your tongue is usually ready enough."

"What can I say more than I have? I love Minnie Lamb—"

"You reject me, then? You laugh at my love—"

"Not so," he said, gently. "But I would be wronging you were I to be less open. I am very grateful—"

"I ask for bread, and you offer me a stone!" and the woman laughed, bitterly. "Be it so! I have overstepped the bounds of lady-like decorum, and deserve the reproof you have given me. You love this Minnie Lamb—but she shall never know it. She is doomed—I could have saved her—I intended doing so, but now—let her suffer as I have suffered! And when you hear her story, remember that it was your love that doomed her to a living death!"

As she spoke, Missouri Belle sprang away into the darkness, leaving the cousins fairly dumb-founded by her wild outburst. For some minutes there was silence. Then Kirke Howard spoke, his voice gloomy and desponding.

"God forgive you, Mark, for driving that poor child to despair. You have broken her heart—"

"No! it is I who should ask forgiveness," and the maiden once more stood beside them. "Forget all that I have said. I believe I was mad. I am better now. Here, Mr. Howard, are the papers I took from you. They will be safer in your keeping, now. Come. There is a long trail before us, and we must be far away from here before day dawns."

"But—Miss Lamb?" hesitated Mark.

"She shall be saved. We must find Captain Conway and his Rangers. There is no danger but we will be in time. Follow me, and keep as still as possible."

And the trio pressed on through the night.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SETTING A TRAP.

BEFORE nightfall Dashing Ned had kept his promise to the Death Shot, and withdrew his men from the chaparral. His scouts had all come in, bearing the same report: that the outlaws had scattered immediately after the springing of their ambush upon Fred Meyer and his company, and covered their trail so thoroughly that the closest search failed to unite the broken threads. The strange disappearance of Double Dan also gave Dashing Ned some little uneasiness, and when the Rangers finally settled down in the spot where they intended to spend the night, their young captain had ample food for thought.

The night wore away, and just before dawn, the man on guard was hailed in a cautious tone from out the darkness. Not a little startled, for he had been drowsing, the sentinel demanded the password, which was promptly given as the unknown advanced. There was barely sufficient light for the Ranger to recognize the man whom Double Dan had introduced and vouched for.

"Go and arouse your chief, friend," said the Death Shot, rapidly. "I have much to tell him, and I must not run the risk of being seen near your camp—"

"I am at your service, sir," at this point interrupted Dashing Ned in person. "I have been expecting you."

"I would have been here sooner but I had a narrow escape with my life from the Wolves, and that detained me. If you will spare me a few moments, I think I can make all clear to you. You are sure your men can all be trusted?"

"Reasonably sure; but to remove all doubts, we will take a little walk in the open ground."

"Good enough! now listen. Colonel Overton captured Miss Minnie Lamb, and sent her by Grizzly Paw, the Lipan chief, to Equality Eph, for safe-keeping. By some means he has found out the girl's parents, and has extorted a large sum of money from them on the promise to restore their lost child. The dog never played a straight game in his life, nor is this an exception. A dozen words will reveal his programme. He, accompanied by Equality Eph, and of course some of the Wolves, is to take Miss Lamb to the Buffalo Hump, timing their progress so as to reach there about dusk. One of his fellows is to guide Mr. and Mrs. Marvin from San Marcos to the same place, at the same time. And he has made arrangements with Whirlwind, the Kiowa, to ambush the whole party. The chief is to kill Equality Eph, capture the Marvins and hold them for ransom, while the young girl is to become his squaw. Overton is to take the money they bring."

"As foul a plot as ever I heard!" exclaimed Dashing Ned.

"Is it not? But the *denouement* rests with you. Your force is strong enough to run the whole affair, if you take them in detail. Ride away from here at once. Get as near to the Buffalo Hump as you can without arousing suspicions. Wait until the red-skins are fairly settled in ambush; then go for 'em! You will either wipe them out or run them off. Either will answer. Then you will take their place. There will be no danger of discovery, thanks to the hour set for the exchange. You will bide your time; I will give the signal for you to break cover. All I ask is, that you particularly caution your men to injure neither Overton nor Equality Eph. Take them captive, *alive*. Am I asking too much?"

"Not at all," warmly replied Dashing Ned. "I had already resolved to take those two men alive. Their crimes have been too many and atrocious for them to escape a public trial and execution. We greatly need just such examples as they will give. Only—rather than suffer them to escape, I will kill them."

"That of course. But if you set your trap well, I don't think there is much fear of their escaping. And now—all is understood, I believe?"

"You say that you will give the signal to us. You will join us, then, before night?"

"If I do not accompany the outlaws. I have been among them more than once, and they looked upon me as their friend. I may try another of my disguises to-day. Of one thing you may rest assured. I will be there, with one or the other party, and I will give you the signal to close in when all is ripe. All I ask is, that you will trust me."

"Double Dan's word is enough for me. You will find us awaiting your signal."

"And I will give it, never fear. Now, goodbye till this evening. The less ground we give for suspicion the better. Of course you will make sure that none of the Kiowas double on your trail to give the outlaws warning."

Dashing Ned nodded understandingly, and the Death Shot sprang into the saddle and paced swiftly away from the timber island.

As the eastern horizon was paling before the coming sun, the Rangers mounted and defiled out upon the plain, riding rapidly toward the north-west, making a wide *detour*, so that the Wolves, in making for the Buffalo Hump, would not cross their trail.

It is not necessary to follow them mile by mile. Their progress was rapid and unimpeded, and they came to a halt about noon, in a clump of timber only a few miles from the rendezvous. Here they unsaddled their animals and cut them feed from the tall, rich grass. Not caring to run the risk of having the smoke of a fire seen by the Kiowas, the Rangers contented themselves with eating their jerked-beef in a natural state.

Toward the middle of the afternoon Dashing Ned sent out a couple of the best scouts he had left, with orders to steal near enough to the Buffalo Hump to note the movements of the Kiowas, and to return as soon as the knoll was fairly occupied.

While waiting the result, he lay down and caught a short sleep, which he greatly needed.

The sun was still two hours high when the scouts returned, and reported. The Kiowas had occupied the knoll, approaching it upon foot, having concealed their horses in some other spot.

This was even better than Dashing Ned had dared to hope for, and it was with a full assurance of complete success that he gave the word to mount. As they rode into full view of the Hump, Dashing Ned led his men in a course that would, if maintained, carry them several hundred yards to the north of the mound. This maneuver, added to the fact that there was no water upon the Hump, he hoped would delude the red-skins into believing he had no idea of pausing there, and induce them to lie low in hopes of totally escaping observation.

The result proved how closely he had calculated. When the Rangers were fairly abreast the Hump, not a sign was given to show that an enemy occupied it.

Wheeling his animal, Dashing Ned rode

straight for the tree-capped mound, closely followed by his men, uttering their wild slogan. Never were cunning red-skins more completely surprised. Almost before they could realize that danger threatened, the dreaded Rangers were thundering up the hillside. Even Whirlwind, daring warrior though he was, made little attempt at fighting.

The Kiowas are horse Indians. Place them afoot, and they are completely at a loss. A dozen good rough-riders can handle five times their own number.

Thus it was in the case in question. The Kiowa was discharged a hasty and ineffective volley at the yelling, charging Rangers, then broke and fled in utter confusion. The Rangers, inveterate haters of all Indians, as well they might be, pressed the fugitives close and showed them no mercy. To be overtaken meant death.

But for one thrilling incident the war-party would have been annihilated. Whirlwind, foremost among the fugitives, suddenly fell as though shot. His nearest pursuer recognizing the chieftain's plume, paused beside him, bending over in the saddle for his scalp. Instead, he met death. A long knife reached his heart, as Whirlwind clutched his throat. A brief struggle—then the Kiowa leaped upon the snorting horse and with a shrill yell that promised future vengeance, dashed away at top speed.

With one accord the Rangers started in chase, but the horse was a good one, and fearing that the chase would last too long for the success of his plans, Dashing Ned sounded the recall. Thanks to his perfect discipline, he was obeyed, but the surviving Kiowas had so improved their respite, that the slaughter was ended.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TRAP SPRUNG.

THE day had fairly dawned before any of the occupants of Black Swamp Island so much as suspected the significant changes that had taken place in their very midst. Nor would they even then had not one of their number, as he slouched idly past the cabin in which the prisoners had been confined, noticed a dark blood-stain upon the slab-door. From this came the investigation that threw the entire camp into an uproar.

The prison had no other occupant than one dead man. The prisoners were gone. Whither? who had aided them? for without such assistance they could not possibly have escaped.

These were the questions the Chaparral Wolf asked. He was not left long in suspense. Upon the soft mud where the fugitives had entered the dug-out, their footprints were too clear not to be easily read. And word was passed around that Missouri Belle had released the prisoners, and had accompanied them in their flight.

Equality Eph seemed fairly stunned by this discovery. He could sooner have doubted himself than the fidelity of the girl whom he had taught to call him father.

"Could it be that she contrived to eavesdrop us, last night?" muttered Overton. "If so—if she heard all you confessed, that would account for her deserting you to try and save her brother."

Though reluctantly, Equality Eph was forced to adopt this conclusion. In a white, sullen rage he sent a dozen of his men out in every direction with orders to spare no pains in the search.

"Bring her in alive," he said, "and the others, also, if possible. But never leave the trail until you have them safe, *dead or alive!*"

Only for the arguments of Colonel Overton, the chief would have joined the search in person, so intense was his anxiety. The half-breed seemed most concerned about his own particular game, and finally succeeded in reawakening the interest of his confederate, and their preparations were resumed. Early in the morning scouts had been sent out, who returned and reported that the Rangers, under Dashing Ned, had left the vicinity, evidently disgusted with their ill-success.

Overton seemed in high glee as their party, twenty in number, rode forth from the Swamp and struck out across the open prairie for the rendezvous. He rode between the Chaparral Wolf and Minnie Lamb. The former was sullen, apprehensive; the latter pale, care-worn and silent.

Suddenly Overton drew rein, rising high in his stirrups, peering keenly ahead.

"I caught a glimpse of a human head," he explained. "It ducked down in the grass, yonder. It may be your fugitives, Wolf. Let your men spread out—"

Equality Eph did not wait for the conclusion of these orders. The suggestion seemed to set him all afire. With a motion of his hand he caused his men to spread out in a semicircle, while he and Overton dashed directly ahead.

The watchful eyes of the half-breed had not deceived him. As he drew near the marked spot, a wild-looking figure arose from the tall grass, and, screaming shrilly, leveled a long musket at his head!

The weapon exploded when he was not ten yards away. Overton fell back upon the haunch of his horse, while the wild figure before him was hurled end-over-end by the viciously-kicking musket.

Equality Eph stared in mute amazement, for they saw that this scarecrow-like being was a woman! Nor was their surprise lessened when Overton, hatless, but unharmed by the tremendous charge of buck-shot, dashed forward, and stooping, raised the woman to her feet with a choking laugh. As he did so, a man uprose from the tall grass and struck at him, but feebly, and with his left hand. Minnie Lamb added her mite by riding forward and facing the outlaws as though she would protect the two wayfarers.

"You owe me a hat, good Nancy," laughed Overton, as he gave his captive a gentle shake in order to settle her clothes properly about her. "But I'll forgive you, seeing my brain-pan is still whole."

"Oh, you Hector Lamb!" gasped Mistress Nancy, tenderly caressing her battered nose. "Wait till your arm get's well! I b'lieve you loaded that pesky musket to shoot out back'ards—you pizen critter!"

For a few minutes all was confusion, but at last the matter was made clear. The two Lambs had had anything but a felicitous time since we saw them last. Outriden by the Rangers, they still endeavored to keep upon their track, but in the darkness the mule ridden by Hector fell, and broke its rider's right arm, rolling clear over the luckless settler. For hours he lay like one dead, and Nancy, while seeking to restore him, allowed the mules to escape her. When Hector did recover his senses, he could not arise, and here they were forced to remain ever since. What the result would have been, had not the Wolves stumbled upon them, can only be conjectured. Nancy recognized Minnie a prisoner, and forgetting all else, she sought to avenge their wrongs and sufferings upon Colonel Overton.

The half-breed appeared to bear them no malice, for though first disarming them, he caused two of the Wolves to "double up," thus giving the Lambs a mount. This effected, progress was resumed, Overton regulating their pace so as to reach Buffalo Hump at twilight.

When within a few hundred yards of the mound, he bade the party hold their places while he advanced to reconnoiter. He ran lightly up the hill and disappeared from view. A minute later a small ball of fire shot up above the tree-tops, and then Overton returned.

"All is well," he said, addressing Equality Eph. "I saw my man and the Marvins waiting upon the prairie beyond for my signal. They will be at the top nearly as soon as we are. Come! but remember my instructions."

The Chaparral Wolf growled an assent. He was still troubled by the defection of Missouri Belle, and there was an ugly presentiment of coming evil troubling him.

Overton led the way up the hill and into the little glade that crowned the Buffalo Hump. There was a grim smile upon his hard-set features as he cast a swift glance around upon the circle of trees and bushes. If there was an ambush, no ordinary eye could distinguish the fact.

At nearly the same moment the Marvins entered the glade from the opposite side. Their agitation was plainly visible, but before the question which trembled upon their lips could find utterance, Colonel Overton stepped to the side of Equality Eph, and clutching his throat with a vise-like gripe, thrust a cocked revolver against his temple.

"At the first motion you die the death of a dog!" he cried, sternly. "Advance, Captain Conway, and secure your prisoners!"

"Surrender all!" uttered a commanding voice, and Dashing Ned sprang into the opening. "You are surrounded. The slightest show of resistance will be the signal for my men to fire!"

A circle of stern-browed Rangers inclosed the astounded party; their rifles were cocked and leveled. Even the most desperate of the outlaws saw that they must submit or die. And with one accord they raised their hands above their heads in token of submission.

"You have sold us, curse you!" hissed Equality Eph, making a desperate effort to escape his captor.

The attempt was fatal. In the struggle a pistol exploded and the notorious outlaw fell dead, shot through the brain.

This was the sole casualty. The Wolves were disarmed and pinioned securely. Then Minnie was presented to the Marvins as their long-lost child. But another surprise was in store. With trembling fingers the old man slipped up her right sleeve. The round arm showed pure and white. The disappointed parent turned aside with a bitter groan.

"This is not our child! Our Julia has a deep scar of a burn upon her right arm."

"I can tell you," cried Nancy Lamb, excitedly. "She is the child of the murdered Isaac Howard—"

"And I am Isaac Howard!" came a deep voice.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"CHANGE PARTNERS!"

"YES, I am indeed Isaac Howard, the man whom all the world—save one faithful friend—has considered dead for sixteen years!" resumed the man who had played the part of Colonel Overton. "The story is a long and painful one, but it must be told in order to explain and justify the part I have played of late years, as an avenger."

"It has long been believed that the Kiowas attacked and burned my ranch, and that all of the occupants were murdered and their bodies consumed in the flames. But three persons escaped. My oldest son was absent on a visit; my youngest daughter was rescued from death by one of the men who followed the lead of this carrion—Equality Eph as he was last known. I was the third person. The bones that were buried for mine was a traveler who put up with us for the night."

"I escaped; but how, I never knew. I remember the alarm, remember a great crash upon my head, and that is all. When I awoke to life again, it was over twelve years later! I was among the Kiowas, a lunatic, all these years."

"I watched my chance and effected my escape. I came here at once, I learned that my whole family had been murdered. Those whom I questioned could tell me nothing of my son Kirke, nor could I find the family with whom he had been visiting."

"Then I gave my life over to one object; that of revenge. It would be too long were I to tell you how I managed to strike the right trail. Enough that I did, at last, and that I marked out every man of the midnight assassins for death. I was greatly aided by my one friend—Double Dan—"

"That's me an' my twin brother!" came the queer double voice of the scout, as he entered the glade, followed by three other persons.

"You here! where did you leave your prisoner?"

"Safe an' sound—tied up like a pig in a pack!" grinned Double Dan. "I done fetched some folks to see ye. Miss Missouri Belle, Mister Mark Bird an' Kirke Howard, esquire—make ye known to Double Sight the Death Shot, or Jedge—"

"Stop, friend," interposed the Death Shot. "Let me finish my explanation, first. I will be as brief as possible. I made use of many disguises in my work, and being a fair ventriloquist, a dabbler in chemistry, as well, I managed to get up a very respectable mystery. I procured me a very fine air-pistol, of long range but small bore, and it aided me not a little. The wounds made by its balls were so small that only a close investigation could discern what had dealt the fatal blow. I only used this when I wished to entirely escape observation."

"Not until last year did I suspect that I had a daughter living. Some words that Colonel Overton dropped gave me the clew. Until quite recently I believed that the young lady known as Missouri Belle was my child; and Equality Eph believed it to his death. But in this he was deceived by his fellow criminal, Overton. He it was who stole your child and burned your house, Mr. Marvin. He brought your child to Kansas and there gave her to Mr. and Mrs. Lamb."

"And now it's my turn," interposed Mistress Nancy. "You shet up, Hector Lamb! I'm goin' to tell everythin' I know. These folks'll know how to make 'lowances fer people what was starvin' to death."

And Nancy did tell. How Overton bribed them to keep Mr. Marvin's child and raise it as her own. How they wandered to Texas. Then came a hard time. They were literally starving. Too proud to beg, one dark night they sallied out to their nearest neighbor's, and using an ax, Hector Lamb killed two fattening hogs. They were caught at this work by Overton and another man, and they fled, leaving their ax behind them.

That same night the Howard ranch was burned. And just before dawn Overton came to them, bearing a little girl, which he wished them to exchange for the other child. They demurred, but he threatened them with exposure as hog-thieves. They begged for time, for they had learned to love the child dearly. That same morning the report spread that the neighbor whom they had attempted to rob, was found dead in his bed, slain by the stroke of an ax. And Overton threatened to swear the crime upon them unless they agreed to perform his will in every particular. Though this murder was almost lost sight of in the wild excitement which followed the Howard tragedy, the Lambs knew that it would require but a word to set the mob upon them.

"We couldn't do nothin'." He had the ax we used to kill the hogs with. He said he'd sw'ar he see us comin' out o' the man's house, in the night. So we could only give way to his will."

"He told us that in a few days a man would call for the child, an' told us how we might know he was the right one. Ontel he did come, we might keep the young 'un mighty close, so

nobody'd ever see it. He made us change thar clothes, an' sw'ar to pass off our real Minnie fer t'other, an' the man who axed fer it. We did jist as he said. A week a'terwards, the man come. He give us the sign that showed he was the right person. An' when he went away, he took the child with him."

The Death Shot quietly led the two maidens forward, and spoke to Nancy Lamb.

"Are these the two children you have spoken of?"

"I kin sw'ar to this one," said the woman, drawing Minnie to her side. "She is the one Overton brung last; the one I 'most kin sw'ar is the daughter of Isaac Howard. As fer t'other, ef she is the baby I 'tended fer better'n two years, she's got a bad scar on her right arm, above the elbow."

With a wondering cry, Missouri Belle pushed up her sleeve. Even in the gathering gloom the significant scar could be distinguished.

There was a sobbing cry—and Mrs. Marvin fell upon the neck of her long-lost daughter, while the trembling arms of the husband and father encircled them both.

Respecting their emotions, the remainder of the party withdrew to a little distance, when the Death Shot resumed his interrupted story.

There is no particular necessity for us to follow his explanations step by step. A word or two concerning those points which have been more particularly brought before the reader must suffice.

From the hour in which his suspicions were aroused that his daughter lived, Isaac Howard never lost sight of his prey. Day and night he dogged them, unable to rest until he learned the truth. He it was that rescued Equality Eph, when that scoundrel was precipitated upon the bull's back in the circus ring, because he would not that his enemy should die with his secret untold. He it was that dogged the spy to the outlaws' quarters that same night, and cut short his report with a shot from his air-pistol through the barred window. He also shot the faro dealer, and James Brown, the convicted traitor. These three men were of those who had murdered his family, years before.

He visited Equality Eph at Black Swamp, intending to play the role of Colonel Overton, but the Wolf, suddenly aroused from a troubled sleep, gave a yell of alarm, and to save his own life Howard was obliged to strike him down. As he fled for safety, he grasped Missouri Belle, not knowing who she was, at the time.

As the reader knows, Overton, believing his shot fatal, plunged into the water to rescue the girl. Instead, he was grappled by both Double Dan and Howard. In the struggle that ensued, Overton was stabbed and choked senseless. A single word set Double Dan to work; and while Howard rescued Missouri Belle, his friend was dragging Overton through the swamp to where the trusty black horse was tethered.

How boldly the Death Shot played his assumed part, how completely he averted all suspicion, have been shown. From what Double Dan had heard when spying upon the real Overton, added to the notes in the captured memorandum-book, it was easy for the Death Shot to deceive the Chaparral Wolf.

Double Dan, while hiding with his prisoner in the swamp, overheard the stormy scene between Missouri Belle and the cousins, and watching his chance, made himself known to them, and told them a portion of what was in the wind. As a natural result, it was decided that they should proceed to the Buffalo Hump.

With a few brief remarks, our story proper is ended. The maiden whom we have known thus far as Minnie Lamb was recognized as the daughter of Isaac Howard, and the sister of Kirke. That she was half smothered with caresses may readily be imagined. Nor was Mark Bird at all backward in claiming his share, as a cousin. Dashing Ned added his congratulations, but Minnie noted, with a sharp pang, that he was far more deeply interested in her whom we have known as Missouri Belle. The warm glow in his fine eyes, betrayed by the crackling camp-fire, she could not mistake.

The situation was a peculiar one. Minnie loved Dashing Ned; he loved Missouri Belle, as did Kirke Howard, also; Missouri Belle loved Mark Bird, while he had eyes only for his cousin Minnie.

But "time works wonders," and it assuredly did in this case. Before a year had rolled by, the cards in Love's pack were shuffled and dealt anew. Partners were changed, and at least four of the players were completely satisfied. Within the same month, there were weddings in Texas and in Missouri. Dashing Ned settled down as a farmer and stock-raiser, in the latter State, and "Missouri Belle" presides over his growing household. In Texas the old ranch was rebuilt, and Minnie consented to make Mark Bird happy. As for Kirke, he lives with them, a confirmed old bachelor. He has never forgotten his first love, and he will carry her image with him to the grave.

Double Dan is still alive, and nearly as swift-footed as ever. When he and his "twin-

brother" go under, there will be more than one mourning household in Texas.

That same night, after the general explanation and "clearing up," Isaac Howard and Double Dan mounted and rode rapidly toward Black Swamp. They reached the place where Colonel Overton had been confined, but it was empty! By some means he had slipped his bonds, and mounting the famous black stallion, had fled for his life. But though for years his fate was a mystery to the whites, the truth came out at last.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

HUNTED DOWN.

A BLACK stallion is running low and swift beneath the blazing noonday sun. Its silken coat is stained with sweat, with foam and with blood—blood not all its own. The rider upon its back is wounded, though he scarcely feels the smart. He turns his head and glances to the rear. A grating curse parts his lips. The hunted light in his snake-like eyes grows deeper, his face seems thinner and more haggard.

Yet far away, but hanging upon his trail like human bloodhounds, ride a full score of vindictive warriors, armed with lance and rifle, with paint upon their faces and blood in their eyes. They have marked their prey and the chase will end only in death.

The fugitive turns to his noble horse. He tightens the reins, strokes the dripping neck, speaks encouragingly in the small, pointed ear. The stallion tosses his proud head and answers the call. For a minute his mighty muscles play like exquisitely-tempered steel springs. Space is devoured. Rod after rod is flung behind him in those deer-like leaps. And the thin lips of the fugitive curl away from his pointed teeth, as he casts an exultant glance back at his pursuers. He begins to taste the sweets of freedom and renewed hope.

Again the black stallion tosses its head. It utters a low, husky whimper. It cannot breathe freely. A cruel cord seems tightening around its throat. It turns its head as though to ask its rider the meaning of this strange spell that cramps its limbs and oppresses its lungs.

The only answer is a curse, as the hunted man drives his heels into the steaming flanks. He well knows the reason; and so does the bloodhounds upon the trail. The bending grass-blades are spotted here and there with crimson blotches. They know that the end is near. And with exultant yells they urge their laboring ponies on.

The fugitive is Turn-over, the half-breed; the pursuers are Whirlwind and his Kiowa braves. Since early dawn the chase has lasted. There was one rapid volley as the half-breed swept past their covert. The Kiowas set out in hot pursuit, nothing discouraged by the ease and rapidity with which the black stallion distanced them at first. They mark the scarlet trail, and know that those frothy drops came from near the seat of life. And as the hours pass on, they gain, slowly but surely upon their victim.

The nature of the ground is changing. Turn-over rises in his stirrups and casts a swift glance ahead. The level plain becomes broken and more difficult. There is scattered timber ahead of him. He urges his panting steed up the ascent, then glances back. The Kiowas are spreading out in a semicircle, as though to cut him off should he attempt to deviate from a direct course. Why should they expect him to offer them this advantage? Surely the trail is open in front!

The timber is scattered in groups of two and three trees. Any one of them would afford a good chance for a fight for life, if only he was armed. A revolver—even a knife would be worth a fortune, now!

Straight across the plateau rides the fugitive. He dare choose no other course. The Indians are too near his heels. Right ahead is a thick clump of timber. Beyond this the ground rises, wild and broken, covered with huge masses of rock. The eyes of the hunted man glisten. Once there he surely can find a hiding-place so secure that not even such human bloodhounds can ferret him out.

Thinking thus, he urges his failing horse on—riding straight to his doom!

He plunges through the timber, then wrenches in his horse with a furious curse. Right at his feet lies a frightful abyss, five hundred feet in depth, the perpendicular sides bristling with sharp points and angles. The chasm is full five and twenty feet in width. The rocks rise abruptly upon the further side. There is scarcely foothold for a horse after such a leap. But the exultant yells of his bloodthirsty pursuers are ringing in his ears. Unarmed, certain death awaits him; there is just a chance by attempting the frightful leap.

He urges his horse to the brink, but it refuses the leap. It seems to know that its weakened powers are unequal to the task.

Not yet does Overton despair. He leaps to

the ground, flings his coat over the stallion's eyes, then runs him forward and over the brink. End over end the poor brute falls, until the jagged rocks below grant him a merciful death. Overton dares not wait to see the result. His enemies are too near. He runs lightly along the edge of the chasm until he reaches a long hollow log that lies rotting upon the ground. Into this he crowds his body. The chance is indeed a faint one; but there is none other.

The Kiowas burst through the timber, expecting to seize their prey, for right well they knew what a formidable barrier lay in the course of his flight. And as he lies in his close prison, Turn-over hears their cries and exclamations of wondering disappointment. He can see them clustering around the fresh hoof-prints. He can see them peering down into the vast depth, and his heart grows sick as he fears they will discover his deception. He closes his eyes as Whirlwind glances toward his covert. He fears lest their glitter may betray him. But as the chief speaks, fresh hope springs up in his heart.

"Turn-over is laughing at the Kiowas. He has leaped his horse over, and is now far away. But his scalp shall blacken in the smoke of Whirlwind's lodge—I have sworn it!"

"We will find his trail upon the other side, and run him down. His big horse is badly wounded. The coyotes will crack his bones before the sun goes down. Let us go!"

"There is time enough. Our ponies are weary and need food and rest. We will wait here, and eat. I am hungry. See! yonder lies a dry log. It will make a good fire!"

The heart of the half-breed grows sick. He knows now that his place of refuge had been discovered. Unarmed, nothing but death awaits him. He will be dragged forth and ruthlessly butchered—perhaps after cruel tortures. He almost envies the fate of his poor horse.

Even in that moment he wondered that he should find it so hard to resign himself to death. He had so often laughed at it—so often dared it face to face, through pure recklessness. But then he was armed. He could return blow for blow. That made all the difference.

He peered forth from his refuge. Whirlwind and three stout braves stood with ready weapons, though in seeming carelessness, before him. The other braves are bringing dried sticks and grass and piling them upon the log. He hears the clicking of flint and steel, and the sound sends a sickening thrill through his heart. Those sounds are to him what fastening down the coffin-lid must be to one lying in a death-like trance, ready for the grave.

He knows when the sparks catch upon the tinder. He can tell when these are blown into a flame—and he hears the faint crackling as the serpent-tongued flames lick up the dry grass, winding in and out through the only too readily ignited fagots.

And now the dusky fiends raise their wild voices in the triumphant scalp-song, and as the bright flames shoot higher and higher, the doomed victim hears them dancing before his fiery prison in mad glee.

From that moment his nerves become steeled. He knows that death is inevitable, but he will rob his destroyers of their choicest morsel of revenge. They shall not boast that they killed his courage, as well as his body. Since die he must, he would die in sullen silence.

The flames leap higher. The heat grows more intense. The log is one blazing mass of coals. The suffocating heat fills the hollow. It scorches the sullen wretch. His face and scalp are one great blister. His blood seems boiling in his veins. Wild visions of the black past arise before him. He is assailed by a thousand weird phantoms. Devils are grappling with him. He fights—but in vain. They drag him forth from his blazing refuge—

A horrible yell bursts from his lips, and rendered insane by the frightful torture, he works his way out of the fiery circle. As he springs to his feet, his garments burst into flame. He is a mass of living fire!

The savages range themselves in a semicircle, of which the edge of the chasm forms the chord. As the blazing, maddened half-breed rushes forward, he is met and turned back by the rifle-barrels and lance-butts of the wildly exulting savages. Time and again is he thus repulsed.

Then—for one brief instant his brain seems to clear. He glares swiftly around him. He rushes to the brink of the abyss. He rises in the air—shoots forward—alights fairly upon the further bank!

But his powers are exhausted in that mighty effort. He totters—sinks down upon his knees. A fragment of rock gives way beneath his weight. He catches upon his breast. Inch by inch he slips down. He fights in desperate silence for his life. But the fates are against him.

One wild scream of horror—a swift-falling form from which the flames burst out anew—a faint thud!

Turn-over, the half-breed, was dead!

THE END.

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